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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 1 May 2025

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS AND TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Exports: Small Businesses

1. **Kirsteen Sullivan** (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): What recent steps his Department has taken to encourage small businesses to export. [903876]

10. **Jade Botterill** (Ossett and Denby Dale) (Lab): What recent steps his Department has taken to encourage small businesses to export. [903894]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): We have begun a series of roadshows, which bring overseas buyers to the UK to meet small businesses here in, for example, clean energy, advanced manufacturing, life sciences, technology, and digital, creative, financial and professional services. In addition, we are offering new online support to help small and medium-sized enterprises win new export orders to EU markets.

Kirsteen Sullivan: I know from a recent business roundtable I hosted in my constituency of Bathgate and Linlithgow, and from many meetings with industry, that a common barrier to small business exports is supply chain instability. In the past few years, we have seen massive instability, including from the impact of the pandemic and now from the announcement of tariffs. Disrupted demand forecasting, increased costs of raw materials and uncertainty are damaging fledgling businesses in growing their exports. What specific measures is the Department implementing to help small businesses navigate these challenges, and to ensure they can maintain reliable supply chains as we enter another turbulent time for international trade?

Gareth Thomas: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, and I commend her for the business roundtable that she hosted. She is absolutely right, and we recognise that supply chain instability is a critical issue for businesses. We are therefore working hard to minimise the uncertainty that businesses face, both in exporting and in purchasing from key markets. Whether through the economic deal with the US that we are seeking to negotiate, the reset of our relationship with the EU, or new opportunities with

India and the Indo-Pacific, we are keen to take down barriers to business. I have to say that the evidence continues to demonstrate that free and fair trade drives down prices, offers better choices for consumers and, crucially, leads to more stable supply chains.

Jade Botterill: I recently visited Phoenix Textiles in Denby Dale, a family-run business that proudly continues our community's heritage in the sector. It raised the concern that, while it operates a "zero to landfill" operation, low-quality, unsustainable imports from Chinese sellers such as Temu undercut its business and the local growth that it sustains. How are the Government addressing this concern, and what are they doing to support British businesses?

Gareth Thomas: First, I commend the work of Phoenix Textiles and my hon. Friend for championing its concerns. Because of the concern she has articulated, which we have heard from across the retail sector—I have certainly heard it from members of the Retail Sector Council—my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State recently met the Trade Remedies Authority to agree urgent steps to prevent the dumping of cheap goods in the UK. There will be increased support for businesses to report unfair practices, and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor is also reviewing the customs treatment of low-value imports.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): Last year our trade deficit was £32 billion and, apart from during the pandemic, we have run a deficit every year since 1998. Does the Minister agree that the trade deficit brings severe economic consequences, and is it Government policy to reduce it over the course of this Parliament?

Gareth Thomas: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the fact that we need to increase exports to all sorts of markets. It is one of the reasons why we are taking urgent steps to agree a new deal with the US, why we are seeking to reset our relationship with the EU, and why we are keen to open up new opportunities through a free trade agreement with India, and new opportunities in the Indo-Pacific. When he served in a senior role under a previous Prime Minister, his party took decisions to cut support for exporters. We are looking at what we can do to help exporters move forward.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): The Minister will know that Meriden and Solihull East is proud to be the home of Jaguar Land Rover. JLR, the supply chain and the small businesses in it are crucial, not just for the constituency, but in exporting. I have written to the Secretary of State asking for a meeting, and I am very willing to work with the Government on this. I recently visited Washington and spoke to Congress people about the damage that tariffs can do. What is the Minister doing to help not just JLR, but those small businesses, and how we can work together?

Gareth Thomas: I know my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is urgently seeking to arrange the meeting with the hon. Member to discuss this issue, because we recognise that this is a key concern of the automotive sector. As I have said, we are seeking to negotiate an economic deal with the US, but we are also looking to work with the automotive industry to increase

exports of cars and other things that they produce across all sorts of new markets. One of the roadshows we are organising for small businesses is about that.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): The Government are far from supporting small businesses to export. Businesses of every size, up and down the country, are failing at a rate not seen since the 2008 financial crash, when Labour was last in power. Confidence is slumping, family businesses are closing, millionaires are fleeing the country—and that is before tariffs hit. What representations is the Minister making to the Chancellor about reversing some of the measures that hit business in her Hallowe'en Budget?

Gareth Thomas: I had thought that one of the first contributions from the Opposition Front Benchers today would be to celebrate the £1 billion investment by IKEA in the UK. It is opening its flagship store on Oxford Street today, and committing to a range of investments in other towns and cities across the UK. When the hon. Lady was on the Treasury Committee, I do not know whether she looked at the cuts the previous Government made to help for small businesses in getting their goods into new markets. We are taking active steps to increase the opportunities for small businesses in overseas markets.

Trade Agreements

2. Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): What steps his Department is taking to negotiate trade agreements with the UK's main trading partners. [903877]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): I announced in July that we were resuming free trade agreement negotiations with the Gulf Co-operation Council, India, Israel, the Republic of Korea, Switzerland and Türkiye. We have also begun talks with the United States on an economic prosperity deal, and we support the Cabinet Office with trade aspects of the EU reset.

Ellie Chowns: Given the utter unreliability and, frankly, economic illiteracy of President Trump, and given that the EU is by far our largest trading partner, it is clear that the best interests of the UK are served by our having a deal that allows the closest possible co-ordination with the EU. Does the Minister agree with me that that should cover youth mobility, and improved energy and climate co-operation? Specifically, will he work with his colleagues to ensure that we ease burdens for British business by linking the UK and EU emissions trading schemes, and by aligning on chemicals regulation, to boost British productivity and prosperity?

Jonathan Reynolds: I think that was a few questions, but we seem to have time for them today, so I welcome all of them. First of all, I recognise exactly what the hon. Lady says. When it comes to the importance of the EU as a principal trading partner for this country, the figures speak for themselves. I disagree with her about us having to choose between the US and the EU, or any other markets. I believe that the UK can be well positioned for all markets. There will be strong political views in this place about political leaders in a range of

countries, but I would just say to her that when it comes to the United States, there are potentially thousands of jobs at stake. That is why we are pursuing a trade and economic prosperity deal with the US, and I think we cannot get away from that.

On the questions relating to the EU, a successful negotiation takes two parties. I want to see greater co-operation. I would not talk about the specifics of any part of the negotiations, but I would not want the kind of barrier that she identified to be in place. I want the UK to have the best and most frictionless trade possible with the EU, in a way that is consistent with our aspirations and obligations with the rest of the world, but she has made her point very well, and I recognise it.

Carolyn Harris (Neath and Swansea East) (Lab): I declare an interest as the trade envoy to New Zealand. What conversations has the Secretary of State had recently with his New Zealand counterparts on the implementation of the UK-New Zealand free trade agreement?

Jonathan Reynolds: First, let me thank my hon. Friend for all her work as our trade envoy to New Zealand. She knows, because she was present, that on his visit to the UK, New Zealand Prime Minister Luxon spent the day with the Prime Minister, and I was able to spend considerable time with him in the afternoon. We discussed the implementation of the UK-New Zealand FTA, as well as the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, and the importance of working together to support free trade and to protect a rules-based trading system. We are working to ensure that businesses are using the FTA to support the Government's growth agenda and the plan for change. Later this month, we will host the UK-New Zealand FTA joint committee, which will discuss continuing to grow UK and New Zealand trade.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): It is good to hear that the trade negotiations with India, which began when we were in government, are progressing well. There must surely now be an opportunity to reopen talks with Canada, so it can buy more wonderful cheese from the UK. With the tariff clock ticking, I am sure the Secretary of State recognises that the US deal is the most urgent; many UK jobs are at risk. However, we heard recently from the Chancellor, when she was in the States, that her bigger priority is discussions with the EU, where we already have zero tariffs and zero quotas. Does the Secretary of State share the Chancellor's priorities, or does he think the US is more urgent?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank the hon. Lady for the earlier part of her comments. She is right that we wanted the previous Government to secure the India FTA, and we were willing to support them fully in doing that, but they were unable to get it across the line. With Canada, there are issues, particularly around agriculture, that are similar to those involving the US, so that may be more of a challenging negotiation.

The entirety of this Government, however, have been clear that we are not seeking to pick between one market and another—both are absolutely fundamental. The Chancellor's comments specifically relate to the

simple truth that there is a much greater quantum of UK-EU trade than UK-US trade. Equally, though, in all these negotiations, we have to focus on not just what can be done quickly, but what can be done right and in the national interest. There is no point securing an agreement that does not deliver on our objectives, no matter whom that agreement is with.

We will welcome any support from the Conservatives for the work we are trying to do. I do believe it is easier politically for this Government to do some trade agreements that are available to the UK; some may not have been politically available to the Conservative Government. We will continue to do that work, and we welcome all support for it, from across the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): Yesterday, I asked the Prime Minister whether Parliament will get a final vote on any trade deal negotiated with the United States, and the Prime Minister stated that it would go through the known process. That process does not include a vote for MPs on the ratification of any trade deal. Will the Secretary of State therefore make it explicitly clear, with a yes or no, whether MPs will get a final vote on the deal with the United States? The PM's answer yesterday implied that we would not.

Jonathan Reynolds: The answer, as the hon. Gentleman knows, is no; we are not, in this Government, seeking to change the ratification process for any treaty. He knows the process and how it works. The Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 sets out that process. It allows MPs to scrutinise any treaty agreed with a country and presented to the House. The implementation of any aspect of any treaty still has to come to Parliament, of course; it is not the case that any agreement on any kind of international treaty can supersede what we agree in this place. In that process, all Members of Parliament get the same rights and privileges, quite rightly, but no—we are not proposing changes to the process by which we agree treaties with other countries.

UK-Europe Trade

3. **Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab):** What steps his Department is taking to help support trade with European countries. [903878]

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): As we have just been discussing, increasing trade with European countries is and has been a focus of discussion between Ministers in the Department for Business and Trade and their EU counterparts. I recently met Ministers from Spain, France, Denmark, Poland and Germany, and work is under way on the first UK-EU summit, scheduled to take place on 19 May; trade and the economy will form one element of a broader agenda about our strategic partnership. Across wider Europe, we are negotiating an enhanced free trade agreement with Switzerland, which we hope will strengthen our trading relationship there.

Graeme Downie: The UK's economic relationship with Sweden is among the most important of our economic relationships with our European partners, particularly with Sweden having recently joined NATO.

As the Minister will know, Babcock is pursuing a partnership with Saab to build four Luleå-class corvettes for Sweden. That would involve significant work at Rosyth dockyard and secure thousands of jobs in my constituency. This would be a joint export product, bringing considerable further value to the UK. Given the significance of this deal to my constituency and shipbuilding in the UK, will the Minister confirm its importance to our relationship with Sweden, and do all that he can to support and champion this vital defence industrial partnership?

Mr Alexander: Having worked so closely with former Prime Minister Gordon Brown over a number of years, I am probably the last person in this Chamber who needs to be convinced of the economic significance of the Rosyth dockyard. As my hon. Friend knows, I have recently had meetings with Babcock's executive team, both in London and abroad. Due to commercial sensitivities, I cannot discuss details of the deal to which he has referred. I am grateful for his recent letter to the Secretary of State on this matter; a response was issued yesterday. He can be fully assured that the Government value the defence relationship with Sweden and fully recognise the importance of defence industrial partnerships between the United Kingdom and Swedish companies. They contribute greatly to our defence and growth objectives.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): Food and drink is one of Scotland's most successful industries, and it is worth £15 billion to the economy. Over the coming months, the UK Government face a choice in their trade talks with the EU and US: do we align our food and farming standards with those in the EU, or reduce our quality standards at the behest of the United States? Will the Secretary of State guarantee that Scotland's food and drink industry will not be jeopardised through desperation to satisfy the demands of, and secure a deal with, Donald Trump?

Mr Alexander: At exactly this point tomorrow morning, I will be visiting a farm in East Lothian, so I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I am fully aware of the importance of food and agriculture to the Scottish economy and, more broadly, to the UK economy. I also respectfully refer him to the Labour manifesto at the last general election, which made very clear our commitment to maintaining important standards.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): The Product Regulation and Metrology Bill, which is about to start its Committee stage in the House, may sound a little dry, but it would give the Secretary of State unfettered power to sign up to dynamic alignment with the European Union at the 19th summit. Given that voters are going to the polls today, will the Minister take the opportunity at the Dispatch Box to rule out the UK becoming an EU rule-taker?

Mr Alexander: I am slightly worried that the question adds two and two and gets about 97. The Bill recognises that we have to find a way forward on standards with the European Union, but to try to overlay what is, as the shadow Minister says, a necessary and somewhat dry technical piece of legislation with the policy agenda that she alludes to is simply wrong.

Industrial Strategy: Chemicals Sector

4. **Kanishka Narayan** (Vale of Glamorgan) (Lab): What steps he is taking to include the chemicals sector within the industrial strategy. [903879]

The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones): The industrial strategy has identified eight key growth-driving sectors that will be the arrowhead of our economic success, but of course they cannot succeed without the critical supply chains and foundational industries that underpin them. We are looking at all those foundational industries, including the chemicals industry, to see what the barriers to growth are, what challenges they face, and how can we overcome them through our strategy.

Kanishka Narayan: I very much welcome the Minister's recognition of the chemicals sector's contribution as a foundational sector and an anchor employer in constituencies such as mine; we have the Dow site there. What can we do to support the deeply integrated supply chains across the UK and Europe that the chemicals sector, and Dow in particular, relies on?

Sarah Jones: I do not want to underestimate the challenges that the chemical sector faces. Between 2021 and 2024, UK chemicals manufacturing fell in real terms by about a third. We are working to improve the UK's trade and investment relationship with the EU. We want to build exports and investment opportunities and reduce barriers to trade. Conversations are at an early stage, so I will not go into specifics, but we are certainly working to help the chemicals industry.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What assessment has the Minister made of the benefits that inclusion of the chemicals sector among the eight sectors could bring for our national security and our pharmaceutical sector? How can all regions of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland benefit from this sector?

Sarah Jones: When we look at the eight sectors that we are trying to turbocharge through the industrial strategy, we see that the chemicals sector underpins so many other sectors. We need to make sure that we protect it. As I have just said, chemicals manufacturing has fallen by nearly a third over the past three years; we need to turn that around. We are looking at what we can do to break down barriers and make improvements—for example, on the cost of energy. That is part of the mix when it comes to making sure that we are secure in the future.

Hospitality Industry

5. **Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the hospitality industry. [903880]

6. **Charlie Dewhirst** (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the hospitality industry. [903881]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): Hospitality businesses are vital to our communities and to economic growth in

the UK, which is why we plan to introduce permanently lower tax rates for retail, hospitality and leisure properties with rateable values of less than £500,000. In addition, we recently held our first licensing taskforce meeting, which aims to reduce red tape for the sector. Next Thursday, on VE Day, pubs and bars across the country will be able to stay open until late to enable everyone to celebrate all those who served during the second world war.

Gregory Stafford: Pubs and the hospitality industry are by their very nature seasonal businesses and rely heavily on flexible working patterns. I saw this at first hand when being served by many younger staff on my recent pub tour of the constituency. Why is the Minister, through the powers in the Employment Rights Bill, seeking to end the flexible contracts that benefit these young people, which will end up causing pubs to have to close?

Gareth Thomas: I gently remind the hon. Gentleman of the dismal record of the Conservatives when it came to support for the hospitality sector; 10,000 pubs closed between 2010 and 2024. The Employment Rights Bill will not have the effect that he describes. The Bill will help to put money into people's pockets, which is exactly what we need to do to help the hospitality industry going forward.

Charlie Dewhirst: In my constituency, 115 pubs and five breweries contribute £40 million to the local economy and support 1,500 jobs. As highlighted by the British Beer and Pub Association, the sector faces a disproportionate business rates burden, with pubs paying a higher share relative to their turnover, so will the Government commit to increasing the upper threshold of small business rate relief in order that these iconic British institutions continue to thrive?

Gareth Thomas: I certainly take the hon. Member's broader point about the significance of business rates to the hospitality sector, particularly pubs. I have heard strong representations from the industry about the need for business rates reform. The hon. Member will be delighted that this Government have instigated significant business rates reform, which previous Governments over the last 14 years did not do, including a permanently lower rate for retail, hospitality and leisure.

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): Residents in Buchlyvie in my constituency are losing their only pub, which is being turned into holiday lets. This comes despite the objections of local residents and Stirling council's planning panel refusing the change-of-use application. The Scottish Government's planning reporter has stepped in and made what many local people think is a short-sighted decision. Does the Minister agree that local village pubs, like libraries and community centres, are vital to local wellbeing and cohesion and that we should do all we can to help them thrive as key parts of our local economies and social infrastructure?

Gareth Thomas: I completely agree with my hon. Friend about the significance of pubs across the UK, particularly in rural communities such as those he represents. It is one reason why we are in the final throes of agreeing extra funding for the great organisation Pub is

the Hub, which supports pubs in rural areas to adapt to changing needs and enables them to continue to be the vital social hubs that they are in communities. I hope that the Scottish Government will have heard my hon. Friend's comments and will recognise the need to follow the UK Government's line and instigate significant business rates reform. Certainly, they need to look at provision on business rates relief, which is not as generous in Scotland, thanks to their decisions, as here in the UK, thanks to the generosity of our Chancellor.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): In a grave and exceptionally rare step, five major business groups, including the Confederation of British Industry, Make UK, the Institute of Directors, and the Federation of Small Businesses, have all written to condemn the Employment Rights Bill, and their views are shared by UK Hospitality and many others. They say that the Bill will damage growth and employment. I know that, and the Minister knows that. This Bill will hurt business. Every business tells me this, and they are telling him exactly the same. Does the Secretary of State think that is why so many of his Ministers are unable to name a single business that supports the Bill and his Government's jobs tax?

Gareth Thomas: I wondered whether the shadow Secretary of State might finally use this set of questions to take the opportunity to apologise for helping to write the Liz Truss Budget, which drove interest rates up fourteen times and did more damage to business than any other single measure in recent times. We had to take difficult decisions to sort out the fiscal inheritance we got, and we recognised that to tackle the cost of living crisis that the Conservatives bequeathed us, we needed to ensure that there is more money in people's pockets. The Employment Rights Bill will help to do just that.

US Trade Negotiations: Farming

7. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the potential impact of his trade negotiations with the US on the farming sector. [903883]

Jonathan Reynolds: I regularly engage with my Cabinet colleagues on a wide range of issues, and in particular the UK's ongoing trade discussions with partner countries, given the cross-cutting nature of those matters. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is a key partner in that process, including with the US.

As colleagues know, we have had constructive discussions with the US on an economic deal, and we remain committed to those talks, but we have made it clear that we will only ever sign trade agreements that align with the UK's national interests. Our manifesto was also clear that we will always uphold our high food standards.

Mr Carmichael: The Secretary of State in DEFRA recently appointed Baroness Batters to lead a profitability review in farming and has set up a farm profitability unit in the Department. Those are welcome and necessary steps, but it is not entirely unknown for the efforts of

one Government Department to undermine those of another, so before the Secretary of State signs any trade deal with America, will he check in with DEFRA and run the rule over what it is doing on farm incomes so that he does not undermine its efforts?

Jonathan Reynolds: We will all struggle to believe that at times different Departments could be better co-ordinated—I cannot recognise that at all!

I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. The moves to look at the business models around farming and profitability are welcome, and I think colleagues on both sides of the House would support that. On matters of trade, DEFRA and its Secretary of State are closely involved with those conversations.

Perhaps in the past the community has not always felt this, but in some of the ongoing trade negotiations that we are progressing there are real export opportunities for UK agriculture. Its quality and the premium and brand associated with that is a market that is growing around the world. Part of our discussions in a range of different trade negotiations is about ensuring that there are more opportunities in future, but I promise the right hon. Gentleman that the overall efforts of Government in the sector are co-ordinated, and that is ongoing.

Exports to the EU

8. **James MacCleary** (Lewes) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to help increase exports to the EU. [903887]

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): Three of our five largest trading partners are in the European Union. Indeed, 46% of UK trade is with our friends, neighbours and partners in the EU. The Department for Business and Trade, along with other Departments across Government—I hope in a co-ordinated way—have been contributing to the resetting of our relationship with the EU, and is fully engaged ahead of the first UK-EU summit scheduled to take place on 19 May. Among the broad spectrum of policy areas, we aim to make progress on tackling barriers to trade and securing outcomes that will help more businesses across the UK export to our European neighbours.

James MacCleary: This is a moment for Britain to show that it is serious about forging a renewed and reinvigorated relationship with the EU, which is still our largest trading partner. If the forthcoming summit ends up as another in a long line of missed opportunities, there is a real danger that Brussels will just move on to other priorities. What concrete measures can businesses expect to come out of the summit to cut red tape and the barriers holding back British growth and prosperity?

Mr Alexander: I would be inclined to wait for the summit before declaiming it as a disaster—I think, in the trade, that is called prebutter. However, the hon. Gentleman's point about the seriousness of the summit is a fair one, and I recognise it. When I saw those images of the Prime Minister sitting with President Trump in the Oval Office, or indeed with President Macron or President von der Leyen of the European Commission, I felt a genuine sense of relief that we have a serious

Prime Minister for these serious times. That serious Prime Minister is intent on, first, rebuilding personal relationships across Europe and, secondly, looking to identify the areas that are transparently win-win between ourselves and our friends, neighbours and partners in the European Union. I assure the hon. Gentleman that there is an ambitious agenda for the summit on the 19th.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): The Government need to deliver measures that will cut red tape for businesses in Wokingham and across the country who want to sell their goods to our largest trading partner, the European Union. Since Brexit, over 2 billion pieces of paperwork have been added to UK exporters—enough paper to wrap around the world nearly 15 times. Does the Minister recognise the scale of that figure? How will he ensure that Conservative-imposed red tape for business with Europe is cut down?

Mr Alexander: We are consciously pursuing a trade agenda based on data, not on post-imperial delusion. Regrettably, the data is pretty devastating on the damage done by how Brexit was implemented by our predecessors. If one wants to look at academic research, the latest publications from Aston University indicate that a number of small and medium-sized businesses, about which we have heard a lot today from Opposition Members, were buried under red tape. It is not only those businesses that have been buried under red tape; we have seen an increase in the number of civil servants across the United Kingdom by more than 100,000 in recent years. That is partly why the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in the Cabinet Office is leading our work on rethinking the size and shape of the British state. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right in recognising that we have a responsibility to try and clean up the mess. That is what we are doing.

High Street Businesses

9. **James Wild** (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps he is taking to help support high street businesses. [903890]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): We are reforming business rates, rolling out banking hubs, stamping out late payments, empowering communities to bring vacant properties on the high street back into use and beginning to tackle the antisocial behaviour and crime that has bedevilled the high street over the last decade. Last month, we also announced a licensing taskforce that will recommend ways to improve our licensing regime to foster vibrant hospitality, the night-time economy and cultural industries on the high street.

James Wild: A British Retail Consortium survey this week of major retailers employing half a million people found that 70% say that the £5 billion a year Employment Rights Bill will have a negative impact on their business and half said that it would lead to job cuts. How does the Minister expect our high streets to cope with that extra cost, coming on top of higher business rates and higher national insurance? When will the Government actually listen to businesses and to the people creating jobs in this country?

Gareth Thomas: The Conservative party has a rather dismal record on support to workers. I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that most businesses that do the right thing by their employees support the Employment Rights Bill. One reason the Bill is so important is that it will help put more money into people's pockets, and that will have a knock-on benefit for high street businesses.

Rural Businesses

11. **Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to support businesses in rural areas. [903897]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): Rural areas offer significant potential for growth and are central to our economy, so we are working closely with other Government Departments, including the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, to improve the quality of life for people living and working in rural areas. Later this year, we will launch the business growth service, which, in partnership with the growth hub network in England, will make it easier for businesses, including those in rural areas, to get the information and support that they need to thrive.

Alison Bennett: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am encouraged that his Department is working with other Departments.

There are brilliant vineyards in Mid Sussex, such as Bolney wine estate, which produce high-quality English wine. They form a vital part of the rural economy and they also entice domestic and international tourism. With the end of the wine duty easement on 1 February causing significant concerns across the sector, what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that the English wine industry is not damaged by that and instead can continue to grow and go from strength to strength?

Gareth Thomas: We recognise that the English wine industry, which has gone from strength to strength in recent years, is a crucial part of the rural economy and of the food and drink offer that the UK can rightly be proud of. It is one reason that we are seeking to increase exports of food and drink, including helping English vineyards to export English wine to a range of markets overseas, and we will certainly continue to do that.

Trade: US Tariffs

12. **Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his US counterpart on tariffs. [903898]

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): As we have heard, the US is our largest single country trading partner, with total trade worth £315 billion in 2024, representing 18% of total UK trade. More than a million Americans work for UK-owned businesses and vice versa. We have regular and ongoing constructive negotiations with our US counterparts, including some this week, on securing a wider economic deal to benefit UK businesses and our economy. In those talks, we continually push the case for free and open trade. Nobody wants to see a trade war, so our focus is on keeping calm and continuing to negotiate in the interest of UK businesses and consumers.

Blake Stephenson: As the UK's top export country, the US is a vital partner to many UK businesses, but with Trump now reported to have made the UK a second-order priority to Asia and with the UK possibly on the verge of giving up its Brexit freedoms in favour of EU alignment, how confident is the Secretary of State of achieving a comprehensive free trade deal with the US, in both goods and services?

Jonathan Reynolds: First, let me assuage the hon. Gentleman's concerns: that is a misreading of how the US is approaching these negotiations. The US has perhaps more complex issues with some countries that will take more bandwidth on its side. As I have always said, the existing relationship between the UK and the US is incredibly strong, reciprocal and mutually beneficial. I see far fewer issues to negotiate to get to that outcome.

Again, I would push back on anyone attempting to put the case that the decisions we make must be based on either the EU, the US or any other partner being our principal partner. The role for the UK is to position ourselves in this challenging world with a genuine strategic advantage because we do things that improve our trading relationship with the EU; we secure this US deal; and we secure the deals with India, the Gulf and other key markets. I am pragmatic about where the UK's national interest lies and am absolutely confident that it is possible and desirable.

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

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): Today the Select Committee writes to the Secretary of State to supply our response to his consultation on how we should respond to American tariffs. We have heard widespread consensus that there should not be retaliatory tariffs and that the approach the Government are pursuing is right, but we have also heard real concerns especially in the automotive industry among those big exporters to America and, crucially, their supply chains. Can the Secretary of State reassure the House that he is readying support packages across Government to ensure that our automotive sector does not run into serious trouble if we cannot get a deal with America soon?

Jonathan Reynolds: As my right hon. Friend knows, I always welcome communications from the Select Committee and the constructive and helpful role it plays in all these important matters. He is right to say that the business community in the UK strongly backs the Government's calm and level-headed approach to these difficult issues. The automotive sector is one of our major priorities. It is the sector that has the most exports because of the brilliant success we have with automotive exports to the US. It remains an absolute priority for us in any negotiation to secure what we need, which is the continuation of access to US markets in a way that is complementary to the US and that meets the ambitions of US consumers. Frankly, I do not see any argument for making that relationship more difficult through the long-term imposition of tariffs. We are closely engaged in a number of important meetings this week with senior automotive leaders, and we will continue to prepare that, working to keep the Select Committee involved.

Topical Questions

T1. [903901] **Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): When we took office, years of Conservative neglect had left our steel industry on the brink, but while others were willing to let the heart of British industry go cold, we were not. I welcome the recent conversion of Opposition colleagues to an active industrial policy, but make no mistake: while others may talk tough, only Labour can be trusted to act in the interests of British workers.

When the future of British Steel was on the line, we took immediate action. I can report to the House that thanks to our intervention we have secured the raw materials to keep Scunthorpe's blast furnaces lit, and British Steel has cancelled the redundancy consultation, which put 2,700 jobs at risk. It was an honour to visit Scunthorpe and Immingham port recently to meet British Steel workers, and I am enormously grateful to them for their resilience, determination and hard work during a turbulent time.

There is still much to be done to protect and rebuild our steel industry as a whole after a decade of failure, and that is why we are committed to a £2.5 billion clean steel fund and to work with industry on our steel strategy. We have always said that steel has a bright future in this country, and our actions over the past month have shown that we meant it.

Gregory Stafford: To bring the Secretary of State to Hampshire and Surrey, there are major regeneration schemes under way in my constituency at Farnham, in Brightwells, and the new town centre in Bordon. Both will ultimately depend on attracting physical businesses, be it retail, hospitality or otherwise, for their long-term success. Does the Secretary of State agree that the Government should actively support prospective businesses in those areas, and does he not recognise that new taxes such as the national insurance contribution increases that his Government have imposed on businesses will cause businesses in my constituency to falter before they have even taken off?

Jonathan Reynolds: I welcome the progress being made in the hon. Gentleman's constituency—I thought he was about to invite me there, which is often the case at topical questions, but I sadly did not manage to secure an invitation. I have been absolutely clear: I genuinely wish the inheritance of this Government was a better one in economic terms than the one we received. I genuinely wish the Conservative Government had not left that black hole and that we had not had to make difficult decisions, but life is sometimes about difficult decisions, and Government and business certainly are as well. Without investment in infrastructure, without a serious approach to the fiscal rules, which was absent for much of the last Government, and without investment in the health service, we would struggle. I welcome the success he is talking about; I am always keen to work with him on that.

T2. [903902] **Paul Davies** (Colne Valley) (Lab): Pubs and restaurants are part of a thriving hospitality sector in my constituency. What initiatives is the Department

planning to support such small businesses and boost economic growth in Colne Valley? Of course, I invite the Minister to visit my constituency and experience our fantastic hospitality sector.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): The hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) might not invite Ministers to his constituency, but I am grateful for my hon. Friend's invitation—diary permitting, I would be delighted to come along. Last year, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced our plans for a business growth service, which should make it easier for UK businesses to get Government advice and support in order to grow. I hope that will make a real difference. In addition, we are considering what else we can do to unlock better access to finance for small businesses such as those in my hon. Friend's constituency.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): The Secretary of State says that all the funding required for the nationalisation of British Steel will come out of existing budgets. We have seen his Department's budget—we had an estimates day debate in the House not long ago—and there was no unallocated pot. Could he be a little more specific about exactly which budget the money is coming from?

Jonathan Reynolds: The shadow Secretary of State points to the statement in which I said that in the previous budget there was a £2.5 billion allocation for the green steel fund. Of course, that came in addition to the £500 million for the Port Talbot transformation, which was agreed under the previous Government but was not in the Departmental accounts—as he knows, it was in a heavily oversubscribed Treasury reserve. Yes, the green steel fund will be there to support what we have had to do at Scunthorpe. Again, as I said when Parliament was recalled, the question there was whether we would pay a significant amount of money for the total loss of the business; give a large amount of money to Jingye, but without the certainty that it would be able to deliver on that plan; or step in and take the action that we did, which I am confident was the right option for value for money and for Scunthorpe.

Andrew Griffith: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. I think it is widely agreed that the cost of nationalising British Steel could run into the billions. Is he really saying that he plans to raid the previously allocated £2.5 billion green steel fund from the national wealth fund, and how is he doing that given that the national wealth fund is operationally independent? Is not the truth that, sooner or later, this will have to come from his department's budget at the expense of financial support for the automotive sector, exporters and hard-working trade negotiators?

Jonathan Reynolds: I recognise the shadow Secretary of State's concern, but let me reassure him on that point. The options available to the Government were: first, the total collapse of British Steel, which would have had an incredible cost to the Exchequer of well over £1 billion; secondly, the request from Jingye for £1.2 billion, which the Leader of the Opposition said

she did or did not agree to in some way with it going to Teesside, at very significant cost; or thirdly, as we have done so far, the provision of working capital to British Steel in order to pay wages and continue the purchase of raw materials and the operation of the business. Of course, those costs will be incurred by the company, because they will enable it to produce and sell steel. I will write to him with the details if he is not confident in the decision that we have made, but it was the right decision not just for the steel industry but for the taxpayer.

T3. [903904] **Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op):** Wherever possible, I think we should buy British, and that obviously starts with buying British-made ceramics. May I encourage the Department of Business and Trade to support my Ceramics (Country of Origin Marking) Bill, which would crack down on cheap imports and fakers who pass off their products as British wares? It is important for the consumer to know that when they buy British, the goods are made here in the UK.

Jonathan Reynolds: I am always keen to support my hon. Friend, and I will certainly consider that legislation. We are not a protectionist Government—we welcome open and free trade—but we believe British goods can compete on quality, and his area is a fine example of that. Where British goods are being undercut, not by price and fair competition but by misrepresentation and fraudulent practices, we take that seriously and have taken more powers to deal with it. I am sure that he will raise this shortly during the urgent question. We will ensure that we give him the support he needs to pursue it.

T7. [903909] **Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD):** Enersys ABSL is a space battery manufacturer based at the Culham campus in my Oxfordshire constituency. The Minister will be aware that Culham has been designated as an AI growth zone by the Government. It applied for an export licence last August but got an outcome only last week, which meant the contract was nearly lost to a French competitor. What steps is the Minister taking to improve the process for granting export licences, so that companies are not subject to this kind of last-minute jeopardy?

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): I am unfamiliar with the particular case but concerned by that description. We inherited the export licensing system, and we are reviewing it as part of our ongoing work looking at all aspects of the Government's work. If the hon. Member writes to me, I will certainly take a personal interest in the matter and write back to him.

T4. [903906] **Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab):** Folkestone and Hythe has a long history as a thriving tourist destination, but in recent years, with Brexit and rising costs, things are getting harder for businesses in our coastal communities. What steps is the Department taking to support the growth of the tourism and hospitality industry in Kent?

Gareth Thomas: I know from personal experience that there are some great hospitality and tourism businesses in Kent, and we want to see them do even better in the coming months and years. That is why we are seeking to

support the sector through initiatives such as business rates reform and the licensing taskforce, which has just started work. It is also why the Government will launch a national visitor economy strategy this autumn, as we seek to welcome 50 million international visitors annually by 2030—and many of them, I suspect, will visit Kent.

Sir Jeremy Hunt (Godalming and Ash) (Con): If the Secretary of State is not going to visit Farnham, can I tempt him to visit Fountain Beauty Therapy in Hurtmore, a much-loved business in my constituency? The owner, Clare Porter, talks about the extreme pressure caused by the Employment Rights Bill, the hike in employers' national insurance and the withdrawal of business rates relief, leading to a crisis in the hair and beauty sector. What measures is the Secretary of State planning to alleviate pressure on this very important sector?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to finally get an invitation to somewhere. We understand that there are significant pressures for many businesses, and the global situation certainly will not provide reassurance in the short term. The measures in the Employment Rights Bill are not in effect yet and will take some time to come in. Since the election, nearly 200,000 jobs have been created, so the labour market is holding up particularly strongly. There are particular issues such as making sure we get probationary periods right and that zero-hours contracts are monitored in the right way, and we are working with business on that.

T5. [903907] **Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): This month I met Berkshire Growth Hub, which works with businesses in Bracknell and beyond on everything from starting up to opportunities in AI. How can we ensure that growth hubs work with Skills England to continue to deliver local growth in communities such as mine?

Gareth Thomas: I commend my hon. Friend for meeting with Berkshire Growth Hub. Growth hubs play a crucial role in local economies. We want to supplement their work with our business growth service, which is set to launch later this year, and we are working with Skills England to identify the skills shortages in particular areas. I am happy to ensure that Skills England talks to Berkshire Growth Hub through my hon. Friend, so that the particular skills challenges in Berkshire are understood by Skills England.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Arrangements at the border are disadvantaging companies on both sides of the channel, so there are mutual advantages to be had in negotiations without feeling the need to make any major concessions, aren't there?

Mr Alexander: I am not entirely convinced that the previous Government are a compass by which to navigate the next set of negotiations with the European Union. The right hon. Gentleman is entirely right that there is a whole series of unnecessary barriers to trade between ourselves and the European Union that were put in place as a direct consequence of the failure of the negotiations led by the previous Government. He is right to recognise that that is affecting directly a whole number of businesses on both sides of the channel. As the Secretary of State said, there is politics on both sides of the channel, but we are working very hard for British business in that context.

T6. [903908] **Carolyn Harris** (Neath and Swansea East) (Lab): Can the Minister assure the steel communities of south Wales that they will receive a substantial share of the £2.5 billion steel fund?

The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones): My hon. Friend and several other Welsh colleagues have been talking to me about this. We renegotiated the deal with Port Talbot and the £500 million that goes alongside that. I had a good meeting this week with Blast, which is looking to build an iron pellet plant at the Port Talbot site if possible, and we are trying to support that. Of course, our focus in recent weeks has been on Scunthorpe and British Steel, but the steel fund remains. The steel plan is still being worked on, which is very broad and hopes to lift the entire UK steel industry.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Sheen Uncovered is a clothing business in my constituency that the Secretary of State is welcome to visit any time. It has been significantly affected by the need to pay import duty up front, thanks to the Conservatives' terrible Brexit deal, and that duty ranges between 6% and 12% and greatly impacts its cash flow. What are the Government doing to support businesses such as Sheen Uncovered to reduce the challenge of import costs?

Mr Alexander: I assure the hon. Lady that we are looking at how we can improve that relationship, and she is right to recognise that a whole number of barriers were created as a consequence of choices made previously, which are causing significant challenges to businesses small, medium and large. As the Secretary of State made clear, we cannot give a running commentary on discussions that are under way, but I assure her that the needs and concerns of British business are uppermost in our minds in those discussions.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): On the day of the Government's necessary action to save British Steel, I sent the Secretary of State a letter requesting a meeting to discuss what further we need to do for Grangemouth, where hundreds of jobs have been lost this week when Petroineos decided to cease refining operations, and where thousands of further jobs are at risk. Will he commit to meeting me to discuss the urgent actions that we need to take to secure accelerated investment in Grangemouth's industrial future?

Jonathan Reynolds: I can absolutely give that assurance. I have had meetings about this issue just this week. We are ambitious for the just transition for Grangemouth and recognise the issues not just with the refinery but with the polyethylene cracker. We will get to work and set that meeting up.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Many rural businesses rely on farms for their trade. Since the Government announced the family farm tax in the Budget, CBI Economics has spoken to over 4,000 businesses and farms across the country—49% said that they have either cancelled or deferred investment, and 34% said that they have reduced or paused it altogether. How can the Government say that they are supporting local

businesses, and what will the Department do to support farms and rural businesses that are suffering because of the Government's policies?

Jonathan Reynolds: I feel that is a question for either the Treasury or the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, but the hon. Lady made it well. Agriculture features prominently in trade and business, and I will ensure that she gets the right opportunity to put questions about taxation to the Chancellor.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Across my constituency in recent weeks we have experienced severe delays to post in those areas served by the Huntingdon delivery office. That follows a recent restructuring of the workforce and changes to delivery routes. Rural communities and businesses, in particular, have been impacted, with missed hospital appointments and several businesses telling me that it is affecting their ability to receive and therefore pay invoices. Will the Minister urgently investigate those ongoing and worsening delays in Huntingdon, and write to me with the outcome of his findings?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): I had to wait 50 minutes for a question, Mr Speaker, but this is an important one and I share the hon. Member's concerns. We regularly meet Ofcom to discuss the performance of Royal Mail, and I will certainly write to him about the discussions we have in respect of his constituency.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What discussions has the Minister had with his counterpart in Northern Ireland about encouraging young people into casual hospitality employment, to teach them about the benefits of work and the importance of managing money?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am always grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his questions. We always seek to keep colleagues in Northern Ireland well briefed on a range of issues, particularly some of the complexities around trade that have come out of the Windsor agreement and need to be managed carefully. I do not think I have had a specific conversation about the matter he raises, but this is a good opportunity to say that I think I should, and I will. I am grateful to him for getting that on the record.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Will the Secretary of State be straightforward with the House today about how much taxpayers' money has been spent so far on British Steel?

Jonathan Reynolds: The amount of working capital provided to British Steel to date stands at £94 million, which is considerably less than if we had given a large amount of money to Jingye, or if we had had to deal with the complete loss of the entire British Steel site and business.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): Modelling by the Scottish Government has shown that Brexit-made barriers are likely to have reduced Scottish exports by £3 billion, compared with continued EU membership. Greater co-operation and a closer relationship with the EU will always be encouraged by SNP Members, but does the Secretary of State recognise that anything short of full single market and customs union membership continues to damage Scotland's economy?

Mr Alexander: In substantive terms, the hon. Gentleman's point is important: we should be looking to reduce unnecessary barriers to trade between the United Kingdom and our friends, neighbours and partners in the European Union. However, on a political level, it is worth recognising that, had Scotland voted in 2014 to leave the United Kingdom, it would also have left the European Union. There is a certain irony in being told that a politics of flags, borders and manufactured grievances are wrong in one context, when his party continues to argue for them in another.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): According to reports in *The Guardian*, Government sources have said that issues around visas have been resolved as part of the Government's free trade agreement negotiations with India. Will the Secretary of State rule out visa liberalisation as part of those negotiations?

Jonathan Reynolds: We should always be careful about what we read in some newspapers. [*Laughter.*] The hon. Gentleman knows that we cannot give a running commentary on trade negotiations, but the UK-India talks have been fruitful this week. I am optimistic and excited for the future of what is a key relationship bilaterally and for the signal it can send to the rest of the world.

Energy Prices: Energy-intensive Industries

10.30 am

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero if he will make a statement on the Government's approach to reducing energy prices for energy-intensive industries.

The Minister of State, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (Sarah Jones): I relay my thoughts to the workers in my hon. Friend's constituency, for whom I know this is a worrying time. I thank my hon. Friend for raising the issue. He is a tireless champion for workers and businesses in his constituency. We have spoken and will continue to speak regularly about these issues and the importance of the ceramics industry in his area in particular.

This Government recognise the challenges high energy prices pose to UK businesses. We know that the ceramics sector is particularly affected; my hon. Friend has raised the issue in Parliament on other occasions. The Government are working closely with Ceramics UK and local Stoke MPs to work out how we can support the sector.

For energy-intensive industries overall, our clean power 2030 target is the key to long-term sustainable price reductions. Clean home-grown energy is the best way to protect bill payers and boost Britain's energy independence. We are already bringing energy costs for UK industries closer into line with other major economies through the British industry supercharger. That will fully exempt eligible firms, including some but by no means all of those in the ceramics sector, from certain costs linked to renewable energy policies, particularly those exposed to the high cost of electricity.

Using more electricity and less fossil fuel is the future for UK businesses. The latest advice from the Climate Change Committee expects electricity to meet 61% of industrial energy demand by 2040, so we are developing options to enable businesses to do that.

We are already taking action. When my hon. Friend raised this important issue in a Westminster Hall debate in March, I noted:

"We are working on how to remove undeveloped, speculative programmes from the grid connection queue and prioritise others." — [*Official Report*, 4 March 2025; Vol. 763, c. 109WH.]

Just last month, we announced pro-growth reforms to help unlock £40 million of mainly private investment a year in clean energy and infrastructure, so that so-called "zombie projects" will no longer hold up the queue for connection to the electricity grid.

We recognise that we need to support a range of energy-intensive industries, including industries such as ceramics, that are essential to our UK economy and our missions, for example to build the 1.5 million homes and the clean energy infrastructure products in which this Government are already investing. Following years of economic chaos and instability under the previous Administration, this Government are implementing a modern industrial strategy that will drive growth and the creation of good high-quality jobs in communities across the UK.

I look forward to continuing to work with my hon. Friend and other hon. Members from across the House. We are meeting next Wednesday and I hope to be able to progress things further at that stage.

Gareth Snell: I thank the Minister for her engagement on this issue, because she has genuinely and authentically tried to look for a way forward. When my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams) and for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) and I had a meeting with the Minister six weeks ago, we warned her that other factories were going to fail, and we stand here following the closure of Moorcroft yesterday. She will be aware that other factories in Stoke-on-Trent are working on short time as a way of reducing costs so that they can put more money into meeting their ever-increasing energy bills.

I thank the Minister for the outline she has given, but she will know that we have previously talked about most of the things she has raised today, and they do not apply to the ceramics sector or to great swathes of the energy-industrial sector as a whole. The supercharger scheme does not work for the ceramics sector; indeed, ceramics companies end up having to subsidise other energy-intensive industries, because they are not part of the supercharger scheme. We have been told that we cannot see an exception to that. We have asked about the emissions trading scheme and free trade allowances and have been told that some are available for ceramics, but that does not go far enough to meet the demands we have today.

We have been constantly promised jam tomorrow, by the last Government as well as this one—well, jam is no good if you are dead, and the ceramics sector in Stoke-on-Trent is on life support. We are at a point where good manufacturing jobs done by proud people are falling away every month. This is not new: it started in 2019, with the closure of Dudson, and continued with the closure of Wade in 2022, Johnson Tiles in 2023 and Royal Stafford and now Moorcroft in 2025. The energy-intensive industries in this country are pivotal to manufacturing. If we see them fall away, manufacturing in this country will fall away.

I ask the Minister three very simple questions. Will she look at a wholesale change to the way in which we do subsidies and energy prices for energy-intensive industry in the short term, before GB Energy comes online? As well meaning as GB Energy is, it is too far away to help. Will she rule out specifically moving any policy costs on to gas costs? Gas is the big cost for the ceramics sector; electricity is a small proportion of what we do. Will she take the opportunity to make a clear commitment at the Dispatch Box, as the Secretary of State for Business and Trade just did when he talked about a sector falling on its knees? Ceramics is there. We do not need the same level of investment that steel does; we need a tiny fraction of it. Can we have it, and can we have it soon? If we have to come back here in six weeks, there will be no sector left to defend.

Sarah Jones: I agree with my hon. Friend and recognise the challenge. We lost 1,250 jobs in the ceramics sector between 2015 and 2023. It has been a very sad decline, and we want to turn that around.

The whole point of an industrial strategy is to have a Government who are proactive in supporting our industries. We will not put extra cost on the ceramics industry; we are looking to see how we can help and support. My hon. Friend has my word on that. We are working on every single one of the suggested policy reforms in the package that Ceramics UK has put forward, and we will meet him next week to talk about these things.

[Sarah Jones]

I cannot make promises at the Dispatch Box on areas that are not my responsibility and rule out whole swathes of policy, but I assure my hon. Friend that we will not put extra costs on the ceramics industry. We are looking to do more and to support, and we will come back. I completely understand his point about the timing and the need to act quickly.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Grangemouth, the Luton Vauxhall plant and now the Moorcroft pottery in Stoke-on-Trent—every single week, we hear of more job losses in energy-intensive industries and more British companies shutting up shop and laying off workers because of the toxic combination of high energy costs and this Chancellor's devastating jobs tax. We have the highest industrial electricity prices in the developed world. Just this week, INEOS told us in no uncertain terms that carbon taxes and high energy costs are killing off manufacturing in the UK.

This Government have been warned by Opposition Members, by the GMB this week and by Unite. This week, they were warned by none other than Tony Blair. What was their response? Advisers in No. 10 Downing Street picked up the phone and begged him to row back on what he said. They asked him to row back on what we all know to be true—what the Minister, Morgan McSweeney, apparently, and an increasing number of the Government's own Back Benchers know to be true: the current approach to energy and net zero is doomed to fail, and voters are being asked to make financial sacrifices when they know that the impact on global emissions is minimal. That is at the heart of this madness.

This Government are wilfully destroying British industry in oil and gas, ceramics, chemicals and metals when they know that it will not make a difference to global emissions. We will not use any less oil and gas; neither will we use any less steel, cement, bricks or chemicals. We will just import those things from abroad, at greater cost to our economy and the climate and with British job losses added to the bargain. As the Government are led by an ideological zealot, the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, and by a Prime Minister too weak to rein him in, we will continue down this path, and British workers will pay the price—in Aberdeen, in Grangemouth, in Luton, and today in Stoke.

Energy is not a silo; energy costs underpin growth, prosperity, competitiveness and living standards. Without cheap energy, our industries will not survive—British manufacturers cannot remain competitive—so what will the Minister do to prevent more British jobs being lost in energy-intensive industries in this country? Will she listen to the head of Unite, who says that working-class people are losing their jobs and that this Government have no plan to replace them? Will the Government end their mad ideological plan to shut down North sea operations? What will it take for Labour Back Benchers to wake up and realise that this ideological approach is crippling this country?

Sarah Jones: The Conservative party is hiding behind this new-found scepticism of net zero to conceal its complete failure to support and grow our foundational

and manufacturing industries on its watch. On its watch, we lost 70,000 jobs in the North sea and 1,250 jobs in the ceramics sector; chemicals manufacturing fell by 30%, and we produced only 30% of the steel that we use in this country. The Conservative party's record on this issue is shameful.

This Government have a completely different approach. We are developing the industrial strategy, which will support those foundational industries. We are looking to make sure we can reach net zero by 2030, in order to provide the economic and energy security we need. The last cost of living crisis was caused by our reliance on global gas prices, as the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) knows, and as he occasionally says in some meetings when he flips and flops on his position on net zero. We will support manufacturing; we are developing our industrial strategy, which will be published in a few weeks' time, and we are already providing more support to the energy-intensive industries through the energy supercharger than the previous Government did. We will act where the previous Government failed to act.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) is an enormous champion of the ceramics industry, and he is right to bring this question to the House today, but this issue is wider than simply the ceramics sector. Tata Steel has told our Committee that energy prices are the single biggest factor in its lack of competitiveness, and Nissan has told us that electricity prices at its plant in Sunderland are the highest of any Nissan plant in the world. We have recommended that the Government bring energy prices in line with our European competitors; can the Minister tell us today that she shares that ambition?

Sarah Jones: I thank my right hon. Friend the Committee Chair for his question. Of course this is a huge issue. Under the previous Government, industrial energy prices doubled, and as my right hon. Friend says, we have higher prices than many other countries. The 3,000 people who responded to our consultation on the industrial strategy said that energy, skills and access to finance were their top three issues, so we are absolutely aware of the issue. We are looking at what support we can provide and how we can make our country more competitive, both for the people who are looking to invest in the UK and for our existing manufacturing base.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): The Liberal Democrats believe that the future of British industry and our national security depend on a serious and sustained commitment to renewable energy. We want to see far greater emphasis on clean energy sources, particularly solar, in order to reduce our dangerous reliance on fossil fuels, strengthen our energy security, and tackle fuel poverty by bringing down energy bills for households and businesses alike. In the face of Putin's barbaric war in Europe and with Donald Trump's reckless tariffs threatening fresh economic turmoil, we cannot afford to be complacent. The future of energy-intensive industries, not least our steel industry, hangs in the balance.

Steelmaking is not just an economic asset; it is of vital strategic importance to the UK. We need steel in order to build the infrastructure required for a sustainable, secure future, from wind turbines and railways to hospitals and homes. Without it, our ambitions for net zero and national resilience will collapse. As such, will the Government give a clear, unequivocal commitment to their net zero plans, and will they ensure that no option is off the table when it comes to safeguarding our steel industry and the future of British manufacturing?

Sarah Jones: I can give the hon. Gentleman reassurance that we are looking at all options to support the steel industry, which is foundational to our country. He makes the correct points about how important steel is to building our future, whether it be runways, homes or other infrastructure. We are looking at all options, and we have the steel plan, which will be coming out soon, and the £2.5 billion earmarked to support the steel industry.

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): My constituency has many brilliant metal manufacturing companies that supply critical UK industries in defence, automotive and construction. However, many of them are struggling because the last Government left us with sky-high electricity prices and a dependence on foreign gas imports. Last month, I launched Make UK's new "Electrify Industry" initiative in Parliament, which seeks to address this broad challenge. Can the Minister set out how the clean power 2030 action plan will make industrial energy costs cheaper and help us drive growth in the west midlands manufacturing industry?

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for her championing of her constituency. I am still to visit, and I must do that, because I know she has many exciting places for me to see. Electrifying industry is crucial. The Climate Change Committee has said that that is the route and that 61% of industry will need to be electrified. We need to make sure we do that. We are looking through the spending review process, as I am sure she would expect, at how we can support industries to make that change to electric and how we can help with some of the capital costs, which will lead to lower costs in the longer term. Making that leap can be difficult, and that is what we are looking at through the spending review.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Why is it better, according to the Government, to import gas from Norway instead of developing our own North sea gas fields?

Sarah Jones: The North sea fields are a declining basin. We lost 70,000 jobs under the previous Government. Something like only one in 10 of the licences that have been approved over recent years have actually amounted to anything, because of the difficulties of a declining basin. The impact on prices of a very small amount of the global mix coming from the North sea would be zero. It would not change a penny in the costs we would pay.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): When the previous Government looked at supporting energy-intensive industries, they included within the definition brewers, cider makers and wine makers, but not distillers, despite the fact that distillers use 17 kW per hour to make a litre of alcohol, compared with

brewers which use just 0.5 kW per hour. As the Government consider what they will have to do to support energy-intensive industries such as distilling, will the Minister consider that the Scotch whisky industry in particular is critical to the maintenance of economic activity and good-quality jobs in some of the most remote and economically fragile communities in this country?

Sarah Jones: We are obviously keen to do what we can to support the Scottish whisky industry. I have been to see it and understand how important it is. The definitions of energy-intensive industries were developed under the previous Government, and we have no immediate plans to change those, but I will take away the right hon. Gentleman's point and look into it.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): On net zero, I think there is a national consensus on making the environment better, creating green jobs and improving energy security, but will the Minister recognise that for many people, consumers and companies out there—particularly small businesses, by the way; it is not all about large ones—there is too much happening, too soon and too fast? Rather than having regressive and punitive taxes on industry and small businesses, there should be more education and more incentives to change consumer and company behaviour.

Sarah Jones: The right hon. Gentleman makes a perfectly reasonable point. We have a national consensus that we need to act, and I think the population are with us on that. They understand that we need to make sure we have a planet for our children and our grandchildren and that we need to do everything we can. As was said this week, we want to tread lightly on people's lives, and of course we do not want to inflict regressive and punitive taxation. We want to make sure we are supporting industry and business, and we are looking at how we can help to incentivise the changes that we need to see.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): Despite Scotland's growing abundance of potentially cheap renewable energy, businesses in Scotland's energy sector are dealt a double blow, whereby energy-intensive businesses in the renewables supply chain are hammered by high energy costs in production and extortionate transmission charges. When the Minister looks at this problem, as her colleague told me he would the other day, will she bear in mind that this is entirely linked to the high cost of producing energy and all the other ways in which the current energy market model serves Scotland poorly?

Sarah Jones: I think it was probably the Minister for Energy, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks), who gave that assurance to the hon. Gentleman, and he is looking at all these issues. We have a very complex energy system. We are trying to make it as cost-effective as we can, and sustainable in the long term, to give us the energy security that we all need. I am sure my hon. Friend will continue to look at these issues.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): A vital ingredient of any net zero policy is an understanding of the word "net". Ultimately, we are going to have to grapple with technology that we have had for over a century to remove carbon directly from the air, aren't we?

Sarah Jones: We are happy to look at a range of options. The whole point of the clean energy plan is that we are using a very diverse range of interventions, some of which are more high-tech and for the future, and some of which are well established. We need that mix.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Given the huge economic and environmental effects of burning fossil fuels, it is clear that the future of energy has to be clean, green, cheap renewables, plus energy efficiency. All of us who care about fact-based, truth-based politics should call out the outrageous misinformation from those who suggest that net zero is the reason for high energy prices, when it clearly is not. Gas prices have gone through the roof in recent years, and we all know why: because of Putin's outrageous invasion of Ukraine. That is why companies and businesses are struggling.

There are two specific things that the Government can and should do to help precisely those businesses: first, decouple the price of electricity from gas so that the true costs of generating electricity are reflected in the price that consumers pay; and secondly, implement a carbon tax in order to be able to use those revenues to assist industries to make the just transition from fossil fuels to the clean, green, cheap energies of the future.

Sarah Jones: The hon. Lady is right to point out that there is a lot of misinformation in this space, and it is often used by the Conservatives to hide their own failings in government. Of course, the energy price hike that we had was partly because the previous Government had not delivered the security that we needed in our home-grown energy supply and storage. We are looking at all options to make sure that we have the right systems in place going forward. We already have the emissions trading scheme, and we are looking at where that goes in future years. She is right to point out that we need to look at all these things.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): The pretence is that Britain is somehow caught in a storm-tossed sea of international gas prices, which drives up energy costs, but when INEOS reports that it is paying £127 million a year in carbon taxes, rising to £2 billion by 2030, is it not the case that we are seeing the cascade of jobs losses because Labour has made decarbonisation deindustrialisation?

Sarah Jones: I think the hon. Gentleman knows that his own party are the experts on deindustrialisation, which we saw significantly across all parts of our manufacturing sector, including at INEOS. I regularly meet INEOS, as do the Secretary of State and other colleagues, and we are looking at what we can do to support the sector. It faces a lot of challenges, and we are looking to try to resolve them.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): My constituents in Edinburgh West, like many others across Scotland and the UK, depend on energy-intensive industries for their livelihoods: defence, whisky and Grangemouth. How can the Minister reassure people who are already suffering because of high domestic energy prices that the situation will not be made worse by losing jobs in those industries?

Sarah Jones: The hon. Lady is right to raise these challenges, which we are trying to grapple with. We are looking at how we can provide support on energy prices and other aspects for energy-intensive industries. Of course, the energy-intensive industries that qualify for the supercharger are getting significantly increased support from April, which will be helpful, but we recognise that that does not go far enough, and we need to do more.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Talking of experts in deindustrialisation, over 1,000 jobs at Luton's Stellantis plant have been lost, impacting my constituents, because this Government did not respond to concerns about energy policy. If the Minister does not agree with us on net zero, does she agree with the general secretary of the GMB, who says that the Government's energy policies amount to "exporting jobs and importing virtue"?

Sarah Jones: I have met and talked with those from Stellantis many times, and while the closure of the site at Luton was of course very difficult, I know that the reasons were global and complex; it is simply not the case that it was because of energy policy. Stellantis faced a whole range of issues globally, and it had to respond in the way it did. We regret that, and we offered support, but we could not get to a point where we could persuade it to stay. We are working with the MPs and the local council to ensure that what comes afterwards provides good, decent jobs, but the hon. Member is just wrong to say that that was the only reason.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): The Minister has told the House that the Government would not impose any new costs on the ceramics industry, but we know that they are going to increase carbon taxes, which will kill off energy-intensive industries. Does she not see that this is a totally incoherent policy position?

Sarah Jones: There was no coherence under the previous Government, and there will be coherence under this Government. We are developing our plan of support for our foundational industries in the industrial strategy. I know that the Opposition are very keen to see what the industrial strategy will contain. They will have to wait a few weeks for its publication, but all will be revealed in due course.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for her answers. Manufacturing currently represents less than 10% of the UK economy, but in Northern Ireland it represents 16% of the economy and about one in four families in Northern Ireland are dependent on manufacturing. It is clear that, as energy prices rise, so do the concerns for such industries. How can the Government and the Minister offer support to those industries to retain their viability while the Government are finding an energy solution?

Sarah Jones: The hon. Member is right to raise this issue, and the figure for manufacturing in Northern Ireland of 15% or 16% is high. Yesterday, I was with trade unionists from Shorts Brothers—Spirit AeroSystems—to talk about the importance of manufacturing there and the importance of retaining those jobs. They made the point that these good jobs have helped not just with

people's lives, but with the sectarian divides. Bringing people out of poverty and giving them good, well-paid jobs is an incredibly important part of the history of Northern Ireland and of what we need to preserve there. I will continue to work with him to make sure we protect that manufacturing base. We of course had huge support in the Budget, with the £2 billion for the automotive sector and the £1 billion for the aerospace sector to support exactly that manufacturing industry.

Business of the House

Mr Speaker: I call the stand-in shadow Leader of the House—one Paul Holmes.

10.57 am

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): May I please ask the Leader of the House to outline the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): I shall, and that was beautifully delivered.

The business of the House for the week commencing 5 May will include:

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

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

THURSDAY 8 MAY—General debate on St George's day and English affairs, followed by a debate on a motion on the research and treatment of brain tumours. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 9 MAY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 12 May will include:

MONDAY 12 MAY—Remaining stages of the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill.

TUESDAY 13 MAY—Opposition day (7th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the Leader of the official Opposition, subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 14 MAY—Consideration of Lords message on the Great British Energy Bill, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments.

THURSDAY 15 MAY—General debate on solar farms, followed by a general debate on the long-term funding of youth services. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 16 MAY—Private Members' Bills.

Paul Holmes: I am delighted that the Leader of the House has given time for a general debate on VE Day. It is vital that we remember the sacrifice that each and every one of our communities made through the loss of servicemen for the liberties won for each and every one of us. We will never forget them.

If I may, I want to pay tribute to the parliamentary security and policing teams. On Monday evening a friend and I, while on the Terrace, saw a man enter the water outside from Westminster bridge. We ran to report it to a police officer, who took us very seriously and immediately reported it in. Five minutes later, emergency services located the person and evacuated them. I thank the emergency services and that police officer, whose name I did not get, for acting in a timely way. We wish the affected person well, as he was taken to hospital.

I am grateful to the Leader of the House for outlining the forthcoming business. She will, I know, be looking forward to the FA cup final on 17 May and will be cheering Manchester City on to victory against Crystal Palace almost as loudly as she heckles Opposition politicians here. I look forward to my team, Southampton, meeting her team later on that month, although from our record I am not sure it will go too well.

[Paul Holmes]

On the subject of own goals, I am sure Members on both sides of the House will be looking on with some confusion at the chaos in the Government's ranks following the former Prime Minister Tony Blair's suggestion that the Government's plan to phase out fossil fuels in the short term are doomed to fail. That election-winning machine, at whose name many on the Labour Benches now groan at the simple mention of, has spoken sense. Of course, it can be frustrating when former leaders weigh in on debates with contrary views to the parties they once led. Believe me, I know how the Leader of the House and the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero feel—we have had more than our fair share—but the Government know that the former Prime Minister has a point.

We know that the Government are dreading the local elections today, the first real test of their performance in the nine months since they took power. What will we see? An ideological kamikaze dive towards net zero carbon emissions that tonight will deliver gains of net zero seats. I pay tribute to candidates of all parties who have taken the step to put their heads above the parapet and who are willing to charge into the political fray. Without them, our democracy would wither. Of course, I would like to wish those standing as Conservative candidates all the best, and I hope the House will understand why I have done that.

As voters go to the polls, they will be asking themselves what sort of council they want to represent them and provide vital public services for them and their families. Do they want the high-tax, highly bureaucratic, debt-laden local authorities of Labour, or do they want efficient, effective and accountable local guardians, which they have under the Conservatives? Let us not forget that Conservative councils deliver better services with lower council taxes. We do not have to look any further than Labour-controlled Birmingham, where bin bags have piled up on the streets, to get an idea of the monumental failures of this Labour Government so far. That is to say nothing of the rats, which not only represent a terrible health and safety threat to residents but terrorise the neighbourhoods they infest. They will not be jumping from any sinking ships, but the Government's past voters certainly are.

Why is the Government's ship sinking? We need only look over at the Labour Benches to see who is to blame. After nine months of Labour Government, the promise of change has ended up in the over-filling bins of the council they control. I will not argue that there have been some changes. The Prime Minister has changed his donor-funded Armani suits many times, while the pensioners that they have made poorer buy their clothes from the charity shops that this Government are taxing to the hilt. Talking of donors, a Labour donor is now becoming the independent football regulator. What a bargain for half a million pounds. Most important are not the changes the Government have made, but the fact that the public have changed their minds about Labour—and how can we blame them?

The Office for Budget Responsibility has halved its estimate for growth this year. With the Government's continued campaign against the elderly, farmers, the self-employed and small business owners, it is no wonder that the Government are so unpopular. They have run out of people to target. There is a saying that actions

have consequences. Can the Leader of the House find time to schedule a debate to discuss the consequences of her Government's economic failures and the woeful actions of their Chancellor? Growth is at all-time low. Taxes and debt are at an all-time high. Businesses and charities are alarmed at how they will keep going. Can we have a debate on that mission for growth and how it is going? I suspect the answer will be no.

I want to raise one final topic with the Leader of the House, which I and other colleagues have touched on previously: the long timeframes and poor-quality responses to written correspondence and written questions from Members. As I am sure all Members and the Leader of the House will agree, it is vital that we, as parliamentarians, are able to make representations to the Government and receive responses to our queries in a timely manner, with a reply that takes full account of the questions made. Too many times now, Members have had to raise in this Chamber the response times, or lack of response to their constituency inquiries. The number of written questions being answered by this Government is down, and I have to say that the quality of response is deteriorating. I do hope she will take this up with her Cabinet colleagues.

As we go away for our bank holiday, I wish the Leader of the House and all Members a restful weekend, with a chance to spend time with loved ones and, perhaps, put a call in to their Chief Whip. We will return on Tuesday, when we will continue to hold this Government to account for the people of this great country.

Lucy Powell: I join the shadow Minister in thanking the police and security services of the House for the work they do day in, day out, and particularly in the case he has raised. I take this opportunity to thank the King for all the work he is doing for those living with cancer; his openness about his own condition really does bring huge comfort to those living with theirs. I also take this opportunity to welcome progress on the minerals agreement between the US and Ukraine that was achieved overnight and the wider partnership. The support of the Government and of the whole House remains unwaveringly with those in Ukraine, and that will continue.

I join the shadow Minister in thanking all candidates standing in the local elections today, and I thank him for wishing Man City all the success I hope it will get in the forthcoming FA cup final, and against Southampton.

It is really good to see the shadow Minister in his elevated place today, reaching the heady heights of business questions this morning. I am sure he will agree that this is the pinnacle of his career so far. As you can see, Mr Speaker, he has really drawn in the crowds. I am only joking; the attendance is no reflection on him. His journey to this point has been—how shall I put it?—one of dogged and determined pursuit. He was a councillor, I believe, when he was very young, at just 20, and has been a special adviser. Before coming here, he stood in a number of seats; in fact, in his relatively short parliamentary career, he has already been the MP for two different constituencies.

In all seriousness, I have a great deal of time for the hon. Gentleman, who is a formidable and notable representative of his party. It might be a bit of a low bar right now, but he is well above it. He really is a rising star of the party—

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Waning!

Lucy Powell: He is a very popular Member of this House. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] There we are.

The shadow Minister raises a matter that is very important to me: timely and full responses to written parliamentary questions and correspondence. I take this matter incredibly seriously and will continue, as always, to raise it with Cabinet Ministers, collectively and individually, when they fall short.

The shadow Minister also raises the issue of net zero. I am sorry, given his glittering career, that he felt the need to read out from the latest Whips' crib sheet on net zero. The blinkered vision that the Conservatives have shown on the opportunity of net zero and the transition that we need to make is why they did so little in their time in office.

Let us look at what is actually happening. The North sea basin is diminishing; it is a finite resource. That is why the workforce in the North sea has fallen by a third over the past 10 years. There is a global race for the new technologies of the future, and we are now in that race—something the Conservatives failed to do for many years. We are making sure that the North sea has the opportunities of the future, and there are some great opportunities. That is why we are setting up Great British Energy in Aberdeen and why we have announced £22 billion for carbon capture, which will be critical to the future of the North sea basin. It is also why we are looking to reindustrialise the future with things like hydrogen, nuclear and other energies.

The shadow Minister mentions the former leader of the Labour party, but he might want to look at what some of his own party's former leaders have said in recent years. I thought Theresa May spoke very wisely last autumn, just as the Conservatives were performing a complete volte-face over net zero, when she said:

"When the sceptics say that the green transition will cripple business, we say they could not be more wrong... When the critics say transitioning to renewables costs too much, we say it's wrong to see it as a cost. It's an enormous investment opportunity".

She was right, wasn't she? He knows she was.

If the hon. Gentleman wants to talk about the local elections, I am sure that we can have an exchange of statistics, but the one that I will leave him with is that council tax bills for people living in Labour councils are, on average, £300 lower than elsewhere. That is the one thing that people should be thinking about today of all days.

I do not want to be too harsh on the hon. Gentleman, because I am fond of him. Having said that, we are now six months on from the Leader of the Opposition taking up her position. Today will be her first major electoral test, and I wonder how the Conservatives think things are really going, because they have been veering from one side of the road to the other. They have been taking just about every position possible. Even on Monday, they voted against their own Football Governance Bill. They actually wrote it, and their poor, mortified shadow Secretary of State, who had previously called it an excellent Bill, had to put up the best act that I have seen in a long time of speaking against it from the Dispatch Box.

The leadership of the Leader of the Opposition is being backseat driven by the shadow Justice Secretary, who is on constant manoeuvres. He is no doubt spending the day on the phones—not to the electors, but to his

future backers. He has promised this electoral pact with Reform, but the truth is that the two parties are indistinguishable at the moment. I cannot tell the difference between the once great Conservative party and the Reform party, because we all know that voting Tory today means voting Reform and that voting Reform today means voting Tory.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): Bagpipe music is undisputedly the finest instrumental music around. Earlier this month, the 37-strong Falkirk schools pipe band, accompanied by 30 dancers from the Denny high school's dance academy, participated in the Tartan Day parade in New York, commendably representing Scotland and Falkirk district. Starting less than three years ago, they have quickly developed into the pride of the town and the district. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating these immense young people and the community, parents and educators who made their immense performance in New York earlier this month possible?

Lucy Powell: I am delighted to hear about the bagpipe musicians from my hon. Friend's constituency going to New York. That sounds like a really fantastic visit. I thank him for raising it here and join him in congratulating them on their endeavours.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): I have a beautiful four-year-old black labrador called Shadow and one of my favourite things to do, to get some exercise and clear my head, is to take her on a long walk. With the weather so gorgeous yesterday morning, I headed to Hylands park, a stunning 574-acre country park that straddles two constituencies, including mine. It is run and maintained by Chelmsford city council park staff with the help of a small army of amazing volunteers. Early in the morning, the only people we usually see are dog walkers, so there was nothing unusual about hearing dogs barking in the distance as I meandered through the woods. But it turned out that yesterday was no ordinary morning and the dogs were barking because their owner, Rebecca, had been knocked over in a canine encounter that had left her with an obviously dislocated knee. Another regular dog walker and I stayed with Rebecca, distracting her from the pain while we waited for the ambulance crew to arrive.

I would like to state for the record today just how brilliant the paramedics and hazardous area response team—otherwise known as HART—were in helping Rebecca. It was truly a privilege to observe close-up and at first hand as they put to use their vital skills and training: keeping calm, administering much-needed pain relief and eventually popping Rebecca's knee back into place.

Will the Leader of the House join me in acknowledging and thanking the wonderful people working on the frontline of the East of England ambulance service and, indeed, all ambulance services across the United Kingdom as well as all the staff who support them, from the emergency service call handlers right the way through to the trainee paramedic technicians? They support us in our hour of need, and we never know just when that hour is coming.

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Member for paying tribute to all of those paramedics, the ambulance service and those on the frontline who come to our rescue at moments of need. She is right to raise and pay testament to them in this House. As the hon. Lady may know, my husband is an A&E consultant. I think people who work on the frontline in that way have a different mindset; he often says that fixing dislocated shoulders and knees is his favourite task to perform at work. I am sure the rest of us could not think of anything worse.

Today is election day, and a sunny day. I am sure that the hon. Lady, as a Liberal Democrat, is looking forward, as I am, to seeing pictures of her leader making the most of the sunny day, perhaps by throwing himself into a lake or river, or by dangling off a bungee rope. Maybe he will even give us a song and a dance, or something else rather hilarious.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): I was pleased earlier this week to support Labour's strengthened Football Governance Bill, which will put fans back at the heart of the game. Will the Leader of the House join me and many other Luton Town fans in wishing Matt Bloomfield and the squad all the best this weekend for their important match against West Brom, which will hopefully secure their championship place for next season?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in welcoming and supporting the football regulator Bill. She is right that communities like hers in Luton, and the many communities represented across the House, strongly support the football regulator Bill, which will put fans right back at the heart of our national game, where they should be. That is why I was so surprised that the Conservatives, having really pushed and led on the issues that the Bill addresses, at the last minute set their face against this important Bill. It is shocking and shameful. I also join her in wishing Luton Town the very best in striving to secure their championship place when they play West Brom this weekend.

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

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): In addition to the business that the Leader of the House has announced, on Thursday 22 May in the Chamber there will be a debate on access to NHS dentistry, which is a very popular subject among colleagues. In Westminster Hall next Tuesday, there will be a debate on parking regulation; it will start later in the day, due to our later hours in the Chamber. On Thursday 8 May, there will be a debate on cold and damp homes, followed by a debate on the potential merits of Government support for small abattoirs. On Tuesday 13 May, there will be a debate on the impact of churches and religious buildings on communities. On Thursday 15 May, there will be a debate on funding for Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, and the Global Fund, followed by a debate on the right to maintain contact in care settings. On Tuesday 20 May, there will be a debate on pensions for people living overseas.

At the moment, we are running at more than five applications a week, which we are adding to our waiting list. By my calculations, given that we have five opportunities for Backbench Business debates on a Tuesday and Thursday

in Westminster Hall, and two opportunities in the Chamber, those applying now will get a debate sometime from 17 November. Can I urge colleagues who are thinking of requesting a debate to get their request in early, particularly if they are time-sensitive? We can then attempt to grant them. Obviously, any extra time that the Leader of the House can allocate to the Backbench Business Committee would be warmly welcomed. If she could give us an update on when estimates day debates are expected to take place, that would help us considerably in framing the debates.

Today is a glorious day, the first day of May. It is Maharashtra Day and Gujarat Day, which commemorate 1 May 1960, when those two states were created. Later today, after business questions, Members have the opportunity to join us to celebrate Gujarat Day in the Grimond Room in Portcullis House. I hope that the Leader of the House, and you, Mr Speaker, will wish all Gujaratis and Maharashtrians a very happy day as they celebrate their national days. Some 37% of my electorate emanate from Gujarat originally, so I am an honorary Gujarati and will celebrate with them today. I hope that the Leader of the House will join those celebrations.

Lucy Powell: I thank the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee for, as ever, giving us a full outline of all future Backbench Business debates. I look forward to us speaking on Monday, when the right hon. Gentleman comes to the Modernisation Committee to discuss the future of Backbench Business and how we can all ensure that Back Benchers continue to have the opportunity to raise the issues they want to in this House and elsewhere. I join him in wishing everybody a happy Gujarat Day on the 65th anniversary of the creation of the state of Gujarat. I am sure that many colleagues will want to go to the Grimond Room later with him.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): Can we have a debate in Government time about how Ministers can back our brilliant mayor Richard Parker in creating a mayoral development corporation in east Birmingham to build the east Birmingham tram? Under the last Government, Birmingham lost £1 billion in support and was left as Britain's capital of unemployment and child poverty. High Speed 2 could bring tens of thousands of jobs to change that situation, but the residents of east Birmingham have to be able to get those jobs. That is why we need wholesale regeneration and a mayoral development corporation. It would be good if Ministers showed how they could support that.

Lucy Powell: I join my right hon. Friend in welcoming the brilliant work of the Mayor of the West Midlands, Richard Parker. My right hon. Friend will know about the importance of national transport infrastructure to our great cities like Birmingham, and about the importance of making sure that we have local transport infrastructure, like trams. The tram network in Greater Manchester is a really fine example of that. Unless we ensure that local people like his constituents can access the great job opportunities of the future through good local transport, we should not be endeavouring to do these things in the first place. I join him in wanting to see trams in Birmingham, and in particular in his constituency in east Birmingham. That would make a great topic for a debate.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): At the London marathon last weekend, my constituent Angus Leckonby from Octon near Driffield broke not one but two world records: he became the youngest and fastest man with an intellectual disability to complete a marathon—and he raised £11,000 for the Special Olympics in doing so. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Angus on his incredible achievement, and ensure a debate in Government time on the future of disability sport in the United Kingdom?

Lucy Powell: I am delighted to join the hon. Member in congratulating Angus on breaking two records—what a remarkable achievement—and on raising so much money for disability sports, and raising awareness, too. There was a reception in Parliament about this last week. The Government are committed to ensuring that sport is accessible to all, and that we have flourishing and fantastic disability and Paralympic sports in this country.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): Next week, residents will be turning out at events across Hertford and Stortford to mark the 80th anniversary of VE Day, and I am looking forward to joining them. As we approach VE day, will the Leader of the House join me in remembering the service and sacrifice of those from Hertford and Stortford and across the United Kingdom who gave so much for our freedom? Will she encourage as many of our residents as possible to support VE day events in our communities?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in paying respect to and remembering those who served in the second world war. We will be celebrating VE day, as well as VJ Day, next week, in his constituency and right across the country. I thank you, Mr Speaker, for putting on so many events across Parliament next week to ensure that every one of us can pay tribute to those who served this country so well.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Property owners in my constituency, including the widowed, the elderly and those with health issues, have been threatened with extensive court costs because permission to enter land on manifestly unfair terms has been declined. The property developer has failed to properly explore cable ploughing, despite that method offering reduced costs, reduced biodiversity loss and a lower carbon footprint. This week's report from the Institution of Engineering and Technology has evidenced shortcomings: the cost comparisons are incomplete and unreliable. Does the Leader of the House agree that justice, not financial resources, should dictate the outcome of court proceedings, and that the developer in my constituency, Green GEN Cymru, should explore properly project-specific costs for alternatives that carry community acceptance?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear about what the hon. Member's constituents are going through. She is absolutely right to raise these matters in the House. I am sure that the property developer will have heard her calls. She is right that what many of our constituents want in these circumstances is access to the law and access to justice, which is often denied, especially when it comes to property rights, and in contests, as she described. I will raise the matter with the relevant Minister, and I hope that she gets a full reply.

Carolyn Harris (Neath and Swansea East) (Lab): Fit, Fed, Fun camps are a Welsh Rugby Union project to keep children active, healthy and fed in school holidays. At Easter, Ospreys in the Community delivered the scheme in partnership with the WRU, and over 600 children across 12 local rugby clubs in the region benefited. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking Bidfood, Castell Howell, Tesco Llansamlet and High Street Car Boot Sale for providing the food, and congratulate the wonderful teams at the Ospreys and the WRU for their commitment and enthusiasm in delivering those really successful projects?

Lucy Powell: The Fit, Fed, Fun camps sound like a fantastic development in Wales. I understand that so far 31,000 children have taken part across 450 camps, and that 6,000 pairs of boots have been donated. What a fantastic achievement. They sound like great, fun camps. I join my hon. Friend in thanking the Ospreys, the WRU and all those involved in that project.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): Earlier in the week, Mr Speaker, you granted an urgent question on the very serious issue of a music band who had allegedly told their supporters,

“The only good Tory is a dead Tory. Kill your local MP.”

That is now quite rightly under police investigation. However, as of today, they remain on the bill for Glastonbury this year. Will the Leader of the House reassure us that if the band remain on the bill, she will not attend, and that she will also discourage all her Cabinet colleagues from attending?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that. Those comments are incredibly serious, and are unacceptable when aimed at Conservative or any other MPs. I totally condemn them, and as does the whole House. We have all seen what happens when comments incite and encourage violence against a Member of Parliament. It is deeply unacceptable and undermines our democracy, as well as putting our lives and our work at risk. That is why we all stand in solidarity against them.

I was grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question to allow Members to air their thoughts on the issue earlier this week. On Glastonbury, I am sure that the festival organisers have heard loud and clear the comments made about the band. It is for Glastonbury festival to take that forward. However, I am sure that no one in this House would want to see them playing at Glastonbury, and I am sure that we will all continue to say so, loud and clear.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): Residents in the villages of Roadhead and Stapleton in the northern part of my Carlisle constituency were recently devastated to learn that the post office counter services that have operated from their village halls for two hours a week were to close at just two weeks' notice. Those counters provide vital postage and cash services in a geographically remote part of my constituency—but the closure of mobile counters is not subject to the same consultation requirements as permanent branches. Will the Leader of the House consider a debate on how the Post Office consults on the closure of those vital but mobile services, and on ensuring that the same requirements apply as do for the closure of a permanent branch?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right to raise that. It is important that constituency MPs continue to stand up for local post office services in their constituencies, as many have done in recent weeks. I do not think that Post Office Ltd has really been listening to those concerns, whether in the case of permanent branch closures or the closure of services of the kind that my hon. Friend describes. Our constituents want access to those vital services, and it is really important that the Post Office remains accountable, transparent and responsive to the needs of local communities when making such decisions.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): A constituent wrote to me recently about problems with the financial ombudsman. He waited months for it even to begin the investigation, and despite receiving an apology for the delay, when he then had a subsequent related complaint, it again took weeks before he got any reply, and that was to say, “Sorry, we can’t begin to investigate the complaint.” He is not the only constituent who has written to me about delays in the operation of the financial ombudsman, which is leaving people facing severe financial hardship. Could the Leader of the House arrange a meeting between me and the Minister to discuss how we can support the financial ombudsman and improve this situation?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely will arrange a meeting for the hon. Member with the relevant Minister about the poor performance of the financial ombudsman, which I am sorry to hear about. I will also raise those issues directly with the ombudsman and the relevant Minister.

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): As you know, Mr Speaker, the parliamentary archives are moving from Victoria tower to the National Archives. I was fortunate to be part of the final tour yesterday led by archivist Mari Takayanagi. In my constituency, our archives hold treasures such as letters from Bonnie Prince Charlie and King James VI, and they are a well-used and well-loved resource led by archivist Pam McNicol and her team. The University of Stirling has a wonderful archive as well, full of political items and others relating to the university. I am also wearing the university’s tartan tie today. Archives and libraries connect us to our past and help shape our future. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the importance of archives and join me in wishing the parliamentary archivists well as they continue their big move and thanking them for all they do?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the matter, and I am sure Mr Speaker heard his question as well, because it is something that as members of the House of Commons Commission we take a keen interest in. It is a huge project moving these archives. I absolutely join him in thanking the parliamentary archivists, his constituents and others in the great work they do in preserving these important archives for future generations. It has and will continue to be a big project for this House as we move forward, and I am sure that he will continue to take a keen interest in it.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): May we have a statement next week from the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in which he can set out his compelling reasons for proceeding with the Henry VIII

power of a remedial order to amend the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 when the Government have already made it clear that they plan to repeal and replace the Act?

Lucy Powell: I will certainly raise the issue with the Northern Ireland Secretary; as the next Northern Ireland questions are only a couple of weeks away, the right hon. Gentleman might want to raise the issue then. He is absolutely right that we are committed to repealing and replacing the Northern Ireland legacy Act. We will do that in due course and, of course, alongside all those with an interest in Northern Ireland. In the meantime, we have to take steps to put any issues right, and that is what the Secretary of State is doing.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): Across the country, homeowners are suffering financial and material harm as a result of unqualified tradespeople carrying out work on family homes and often botching it. Many families across the country, not least in my constituency of Glasgow West, have suffered real hardship and worry as a result. As consumer protection is a reserved issue, would the Leader of the House consider giving up Government time for a debate where solutions to address the situation could be debated?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Member is absolutely right that nothing is more frustrating and—quite honestly—upsetting for our constituents than having dodgy works done at home and having no recourse and accountability to those who did them. I will ensure that the Minister takes a look at the issues she has raised. Trading standards and ensuring that we have quality TrustMark schemes across the country are important to this Government, and we will keep the House updated.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): This week, an important report was published on the topic of climate change—not the one by the formerly high-profile politician whose consultancy has done work for major fossil fuel producers such as Saudi Arabia, but the one published by the Committee on Climate Change yesterday on adaptation. That report pointed out that this country’s approach to adaptation is not working and needs urgent strengthening, and that we are woefully unprepared for the reality of the impacts of climate change, which are already with us and will get worse, especially if the flat-earthers who seek to deny it and to change policy direction get their way. Will the Leader of the House ask the Prime Minister to make a statement recognising the urgency of adaptation and committing in the spending review to the funding needed to make the country resilient to the heat stress and flooding that will inevitably follow if we do not tackle the reality of the climate crisis?

Lucy Powell: I agree with the hon. Lady. The Climate Change Committee report is important and looks back, for the most part, at recent years and the previous Government’s record on these matters, which was not good enough. We absolutely need to go further and faster, which is what this Government are doing, to ensure that we have those adaptations, make the transition to become a clean energy superpower, and develop the severe weather and flood resilience that our communities need to cope with the impacts of climate change, which are coming anyway despite our best efforts to get to net zero by 2050.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): In the past few weeks, Cumbernauld has had two significant fires: a wildfire at Fannyside loch, which took two days to get under control—the night sky glowing orange from the flames was visible 10 miles away in Glasgow—and a very different fire in a Lenziemill industrial estate unit, where there were a number of explosions and six people were injured. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking all the firefighters involved in tackling the blazes, and might we have a debate in Government time on the increasing danger of wildfires in our changing climate?

Lucy Powell: That is a relevant question given the one that came before about the Climate Change Committee report published this week. I join my hon. Friend in thanking the Scottish fire and rescue service. Yes, in winter the danger is perhaps flooding, but these fires and wildfires are a stark reminder that, as we enter the summer months, wildfires are one of the symptoms of climate change, and we need to support our fire and rescue services in tackling those issues, as well as take long-term steps to reduce and minimise the impacts of wildfires.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Thankfully, there is mostly consensus across the House on a two-state solution, but I am not sure that that consensus applies in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. There appears to be a slight emerging difference between the Minister for the middle east, the hon. Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), and the Foreign Secretary on the timing of the recognition of the Palestinian state. The Minister said a few days ago that the recognition needed to consider practical things on the ground such as legal, governance and security, while the Foreign Secretary has suggested over the past 24 hours that recognition should come before a settlement on a two-state solution, so there seems to be some confusion. Given the importance of the Palestinian people having a stable and secure future without Hamas, may we have an urgent debate about the two-state solution, and will the Leader of the House assure us that, when recognition of a Palestinian state comes, we will have a full debate as well as a vote?

Lucy Powell: Let me reassure the right hon. Gentleman: there are no differing opinions on this in Government—we are as one. We absolutely want to see a two-state solution, which is the only long-term political solution for the middle east, and that includes a recognised and safe and secure long-term state of Palestine. As he says, getting to that recognition will not happen overnight and is not totally straightforward. The Government are absolutely committed—it was in our manifesto—to recognising the state of Palestine. I will ensure that Ministers always come to the House, as they have been doing, to update Members on any developments, with proper debates, statements and votes on these matters where necessary.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): Last Saturday, Blackburn United's 2009 team played in the inspiresport Scottish Youth cup final against Dundee United's 2009s at Falkirk stadium. The Blackburn team have gone from strength to strength this season, culminating in a fantastic win to bring home the cup. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the whole team on their stunning 2-0 victory and wish them all the best in future competitions?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Blackburn United in her constituency and all those involved. We get a lot of football questions at this time of year in business questions, and I enjoy answering questions about all the local football teams. This Government are committed to grassroots football and ensuring that we put fans and communities back at the heart of our national game.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): A fundamental part of parliamentary privilege is the ability of the press to report proceedings in Parliament freely, so it is concerning that the Independent Press Standards Organisation has given a ruling against the *Telegraph* for reporting comments made by Michael Gove—now Lord Gove—in this House regarding the links between the Muslim Association of Britain and the Muslim Brotherhood. Does the Leader of the House agree that this is a disturbing step for the freedom of the press, and will she urge the Culture Secretary to come to the House to reiterate that?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Member for raising that important matter. I read the ruling and the article by Michael Gove in the *Telegraph* earlier this week. We are absolutely committed to protecting press freedoms, protecting parliamentary privilege and the right of Members to raise matters in this House that could be subject to parliamentary privilege, and the press's right to report on those matters when they are raised in this place. As he said, the independent, self-regulatory IPSO has made this finding, but I will ensure he gets a ministerial response.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): Before others were successfully and bravely completing the London and Manchester marathons, Brian Innes, a maths teacher at Queen Anne high school in Dunfermline, was completing the very difficult course of the Boston marathon in a little over three hours—a fantastic achievement, setting a great example to his pupils. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Mr Innes on his achievement, wish him luck in the Berlin marathon, which he hopes to complete later this year, and suggest ways in which this House can influence policy that supports increased physical activity?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Brian Innes on completing the Boston marathon in three hours, which is a remarkable achievement. I am not sure which is a greater challenge: completing a marathon in that time or being a maths teacher to many rowdy teenagers, I am sure. I thank him for all the work he does.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): When the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer recently visited Mid Bedfordshire, they will have experienced at first hand the lack of step-free access at Flitwick station. Does the Leader of the House agree that this has been an issue for too many years across the country, impacting not just disabled passengers but families and those with luggage? Will she join me and my constituents in calling on Network Rail to deliver its step-free access plans much more quickly, and will she allow time for a debate or an update from the Secretary of State on this national issue?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely—step-free access to transport is critical for our constituents and our communities. The Access for All programme should be happening

[Lucy Powell]

faster and better. That is why the Secretary of State is considering how we can ensure that the Access for All programme is delivered and that constituents such as those of the hon. Member have step-free access to transport. I will ensure that the Secretary of State keeps the House informed of developments on this matter, which is raised with me regularly at business questions.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): I echo the Leader of the House's comments earlier regarding cancer. I recently visited Malcolm's Retreat, a lakeside lodge in a peaceful location, tucked away at Rookery Waters in my constituency. This is a new initiative by local charity the Malcolm Whales Foundation. The retreat offers respite care to those suffering with cancer and free wellbeing breaks for the medical staff who work in providing cancer care. I spoke to Damien, whose father the retreat and charity are named after, and he explained the charity's wider fundraising efforts. Each summer, it holds the Dorset walk, a trek along the Jurassic coast for 500 children, which will take place this year between 11 and 13 July. Will the Leader of the House congratulate Damien on the success of the charity, highlight the importance of resources such as Malcolm's Retreat in providing support for those affected by cancer and, if she so wishes, volunteer to take part in the walk?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely, and I pay tribute to Damien for all his fundraising efforts, and for establishing Malcolm's Retreat in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. It sounds like a fantastic facility, which I am sure that those who have cancer or those conditions, and their families, welcome. The Dorset walk in July, which is raising money for that important charity, sounds glorious. I would love nothing more than a walk along the Dorset coast, so if I have time I will join him. If not, I look forward to hearing about it, perhaps in future business questions.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): Last week I hosted a haematology workforce roundtable to understand the significant issues in that vital part of the NHS. It is understaffed, overworked, hampered by inefficiencies, and 55% of haematology consultants will reach retirement age by the end of this decade. Will the Leader of the House seek assurances from the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care that haematology will be included in the national cancer plan, and will she grant Government time for a debate to address that impending NHS crisis?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely, and I assure the hon. Member that the Government's national cancer plan will consider workforce issues, particularly in relation those who are specialists in haematology and other areas of cancer treatment. I will ensure that health Ministers and the Secretary of State are forthcoming to the House in developing that plan and the workforce plan that sits alongside it.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I am sorry that Mr Speaker has just left the Chair, because I wanted to commend him for hosting such a magnificent St George's day celebration in Speaker's House last week, on behalf of the Royal Society of St George, and on being the first Speaker to wear a red rose in the Chair on St George's day—a tradition that I hope we will all adopt. I am,

however, disappointed that the debate secured by me and the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) for St George's day is taking two weeks to come to the Floor of the House, and I wondered whether the Leader of the House could explain that.

I also wish to raise an issue on behalf of my constituents. The historic market town of Romford, like many towns represented by hon. Members across the House, has a proliferating and wholly disproportionate number of barber shops, vape shops, fishmongers and outlets that appear devoid of any custom. In Havering we have only one trading standards officer, which is simply not enough. Something is very wrong with our high streets, and my constituents are concerned and want action to deal with that. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time to discuss how we can tackle the growing epidemic of rogue traders and sham businesses that blight our communities, and instead inspire people back to shop local again?

Lucy Powell: I join the hon. Member in thanking Mr Speaker for hosting the St George's day reception last week, and I am sorry that the debate that he and my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) have asked for could not be as near to St George's day as he might have liked. As he will know, we had to schedule important Government business last Thursday, in part because it was a shorter three-day week, which meant that the Thursday was more like a Wednesday. I am glad that the debate has now been scheduled, and I wish the hon. Member and my hon. Friend well with that.

The hon. Member raises the important matter of the future of our high streets, and many of the issues that he sees on the high street in Romford, which I am sure we can all relate to in our own communities. He will be aware that the police and security services recently did a big blitz on businesses like the ones he described, which might be a cover for other activities rather than the activities they claim to be. That was a successful operation, and we hope to see more of that in future. This Government are committed to the future of our high streets, looking at reforming business rates and other measures, so that we get good, long-standing, independent businesses back into the heart of our communities.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Jim Shannon to ask the final question.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Leader of the House for all her answers every week. Over 2 million people in Myanmar's Rakhine state are currently facing severe food insecurity amid ongoing conflict and restricted humanitarian access. The World Food Programme has announced cuts to food aid for over 1 million people due to a significant funding shortfall. In Bangladesh, over 1 million Rohingya refugees remain in overcrowded camps, including some 65,000 who have arrived since late 2023. Several key aid operations are at risk of suspension, and humanitarian conditions continue to deteriorate across both countries. What recent assessments have been made of the humanitarian needs of Rohingya communities in Myanmar and in refugee camps in neighbouring countries? Will the Leader of the House ask the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office what steps are being taken to support the provision of food aid and other essential humanitarian assistance?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Gentleman thanks me for my answers every week, but may I thank him for his questions every week? He is reliably here every single week—I do not think he has missed business questions since I became Leader of the House. Yet again he raises the important matter of the displaced Rohingya community in Bangladesh. As I hope he knows, the UK Government are the largest provider of water, sanitation and hygiene facilities for the displaced Rohingya population. Our humanitarian programme in Bangladesh is focused on meeting basic urgent needs of refugees, particularly the Rohingya community.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): If the Leader of the House will oblige, there is one more final question.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I am back by popular demand. May I draw the House's attention to the fact that we have just been joined in the Public Gallery by members of the Victoria Cross and George Cross Association? Will the Leader of the House join me in passing on our admiration, respect and thanks to this extraordinary group of public servants from across the world, and to thank them for their redoubtable service to the nation?

Lucy Powell: I am delighted to do so and I thank the hon. Gentleman for taking the opportunity to draw our attention to their visit. I am sure the whole House will want to join him in thanking the members of the Victoria Cross and George Cross Association for all the work they do and for their spirit of fantastic public service. We recognise and support that in this country, and I am sure Members of the House will recognise that.

Point of Order

11.52 am

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In response to my topical question earlier, the Secretary of State for Business and Trade, the right hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), expressed his disappointment that I had not invited him to my constituency—in fact, I have never seen him look so forlorn. I seek your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker, on how I can correct the record and ensure that the Secretary of State and all hon. Members know that they are welcome to visit my fabulous constituency.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The hon. Member has put his point on the record. I cannot ensure that the appropriate Minister will visit his constituency, but the whole House is now invited, no doubt on the same day, so I wish him well.

Backbench Business

Parkinson's Awareness Month

[*Relevant document: e-petition 713714, Increase funding for people with Parkinson's and implement the "Parky Charter".*]

11.53 am

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Parkinson's awareness month.

I extend my gratitude to the Backbench Business Committee for granting me this debate, and I thank hon. Members for attending, especially given that local elections are taking place across some parts of the country—I know the pull of the doorsteps is strong for politicians, as can be the power of persuasion from party bosses and headquarters.

I thank hon. Members for supporting my application for the debate, including my hon. Friends the Members for Aldershot (Alex Baker), for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee), for Redditch (Chris Bloore) and for Weston-super-Mare (Dan Aldridge), who are sadly unable to be here but who I wanted to mention. I also thank the current and former chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on Parkinson's, my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glindon) and Baroness Gale.

I found it surprising and, to be honest, a little shocking that there has never been a full debate in this Chamber on Parkinson's, so I hope to lend my voice to the approximately 225 people in my constituency, and to the community of some 153,000 people across the UK, who are navigating life with Parkinson's, along with their loved ones and the dedicated professionals who support them. Yesterday concluded Parkinson's Awareness Month, but we must commit to doing much more than simply raising awareness; we must act. Awareness is not progress, and people with Parkinson's can no longer afford to wait.

Parkinson's is the fastest-growing neurological condition in the world, ironically due mainly to people living longer lives and being diagnosed in their later years. It is sometimes said that people do not die from Parkinson's, but the condition is life-limiting, complex and relentless. It does not discriminate by postcode, profession, political affiliation or any other characteristic. It strips away not only physical ability, but voice, independence and identity. It affects not only those diagnosed, but their loved ones in profound and lasting ways. There is no cure, no treatment to slow or halt progress and no respite, yet there is hope. There is a path to change, and today I call on the Government and this House to walk that path with the urgency and compassion that the Parkinson's community deserves.

When I was preparing for this debate, I was given a copy of a poem called "A Jump Too Far", by Bobbie Coelho, a Parkinson's UK campaigner who was diagnosed in 2002. I will read it out to put it on the record, because I feel that these words are important:

"I wish you could jump into my shoes for just an hour or so
To know just how I feel, for then you would know
The truth about PD, as far as it goes
I wish you could jump into my shoes when my face freezes
You can't understand when I talk (I know it's not easy)
To hear me called a miserable cow

How I wish I could talk happily as they're doing now

I wish you could jump into my shoes when I can't move across the floor.

How I admire your movements, so easy and so free

I just wish it could also be me

I wish you could jump into my shoes when I can't walk down the street

And get stares from the people that I meet

I wish you could jump into my shoes when I can't do anything at all

And, reluctantly, have to watch my husband do it all

I wish you could jump into my shoes to see a future I don't want to see

With no cure in sight and I know there never will be

You hear about cancer there's adverts all around

But awareness of PD there's not a sound

If you could jump into my shoes

You would see how frightening PD can be".

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The hon. Gentleman must be congratulated on bringing forward this most important debate. The charity Parkinson's UK organises voluntary support groups across the country—the nearest ones to Gainsborough are in Doncaster, Brigg and Scunthorpe. Does he think that the Government and local authorities can do more to encourage people to volunteer? Voluntary action across the country is quite uneven, so that might be one step forward.

Graeme Downie: The right hon. Gentleman has anticipated a point that I will make later, but I could not agree more about the need for volunteer support. Increasing the awareness of that volunteer support at the point of diagnosis is absolutely key, and I will refer to that later in my remarks. I thank him for the intervention.

I found Bobbie's poem so moving because it reflects precisely what I heard in preparing for this debate, which I suspect colleagues in the Chamber also hear, from constituents living with Parkinson's. I have been truly touched by the willingness and openness of those constituents, supported by Parkinson's UK and Cure Parkinson's, to share their experiences and stories. They do so in the hope that their voices combined will be greater than the sum of their parts, and that together they can improve the journey for those following in their footsteps.

The reality of living with Parkinson's can be harsh. Although it is categorised as a movement disorder, it can affect movement, speech, swallowing and cognition. It can cause hallucinations, depression and pain. For many, their condition fluctuates unpredictably throughout the day, so what might seem like a good morning can spiral very deeply into a challenging afternoon, and too many people still wait too long for a diagnosis.

I draw the attention of the House to the Movers and Shakers, a group of people with Parkinson's whose outstanding contribution and production have been a beacon of support for those with Parkinson's. Some of them are in the Gallery and will be familiar to many in this House, including Gillian Lacey-Solymar, Rory Cellan-Jones, Mark Mardell and Sir Nicholas Mostyn. I thank them for being here today.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech about this very complex condition. He mentioned Rory Cellan-Jones, who is well known as a BBC technology correspondent and, as the person who houses Sophie from Romania, a famous dog lover. He is my constituent in Ealing.

I totally agree with my hon. Friend; the “Movers and Shakers” podcast, which won the Broadcasting Press Guild’s best podcast of the year award, has shown with such humanity and warmth the ups and downs—a lot of downs—of this very sad condition, which is growing. I assure the 153,000 sufferers in this country and the 10 million worldwide that today’s attendance is a reflection not of the importance of this debate, but of electoral events outside this House. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Parky charter to encourage more research into this terrible condition that afflicts so many, which Rory lobbies me quite often about, deserves Government funding? I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister on the Treasury Bench is also listening.

Graeme Downie: If Rory has already told my hon. Friend a little bit about the Parky charter, she is about to get a repeat. On World Parkinson’s Day, the Movers and Shakers group brought hundreds of people with Parkinson’s together in Old Palace Yard. Those people sang with one voice, in a reworked version of “I Will Survive”, their demands to have the Parky charter adopted. I will spare the House my singing voice, but that charter is a bold five-point plan backed by the three major Parkinson’s charities in the UK. It is not a wish list; it is a road map to dignity, and I will take some time to outline those five demands.

The first demand is for speedy specialists; people referred for a possible Parkinson’s diagnosis should see a consultant within 18 weeks and have annual reviews thereafter. The second is instant information; a Parkinson’s diagnosis should be accompanied by immediate, clear and accessible information. The third is the Parkinson’s passport, a tool to communicate patients’ needs across all healthcare touchpoints. The fourth is comprehensive care; every person with Parkinson’s should have full access to a multidisciplinary team of specialist nurses, physiotherapists, and occupational and speech therapists. The fifth is the quest for a cure—a determined and funded national commitment to support Parkinson’s research. These are not unattainable dreams; they are basic standards of decency, fairness and evidence-based healthcare.

I will start with the first two demands, which are diagnosis and information. Currently, neurology services in England are seeing only about half of patients within the 18-week target, and the waiting list for neurology services now exceeds 230,000. The situation in Scotland and Wales follows a similar pattern of long waiting lists. In my constituency, NHS Fife has a median wait for a first neurology appointment of 31 weeks, and nine out of 10 people are seen within 87 weeks. In contrast, next door in Forth Valley—which is also part of my constituency—nine out of 10 people are seen within just nine weeks. There are currently 1,836 people waiting to see a neurologist in Fife, and 403 in Forth Valley. It can never be acceptable for a person’s postcode to dictate the quality of care they receive.

As part of my preparation for today’s debate, I heard from someone who has been diagnosed with young onset Parkinson’s disease at the age of just 47, just a few

years older than me. He told me that when his GP identified symptoms, he was referred to his neurology service urgently—I underline the word urgently—and that the expectation from his GP was that “urgent” meant that he would be “seen within days”. When he had not heard from the hospital five days later, he called to check that it had received his referral, and was told that the person at the top of the waiting list had been waiting for 39 weeks so far—39 weeks so far for an urgent appointment.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that awaiting a diagnosis, and that shattering diagnosis when it eventually comes, has a massive impact on not just the individual concerned but their wider family, and that any action on this issue should be holistic and family-based?

Graeme Downie: That was exactly my response when I heard that story. I imagined what it must be like for someone and their loved ones to sit with a suggested diagnosis of something so serious and significant, having to wait nine months before even seeing a specialist for the first time. To me, it felt like a clash between bureaucracy and humanity. We can and we must push for better.

The UK currently ranks 44th out of 45 European nations when it comes to the number of neurologists per capita. That is not a workforce issue or a bureaucratic issue—it is a sign of a systematic failure and a life-altering injustice. Parkinson’s is a condition that can progress rapidly, and delays mean lost time, lost function and lost hope. However, the crisis does not end with diagnosis; in fact, for many, that is when the sense of abandonment begins.

Nearly a quarter of people diagnosed with Parkinson’s report that they were not given adequate information about their condition. A similar number, as referred to by the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), were not told about the support available through Parkinson’s UK, the helplines, the care advisers, the groups that offer peer support and the crucial services that can help people adapt, cope and find community. Can you imagine, Madam Deputy Speaker, receiving a life-altering diagnosis and being sent home with no clear path, no specialist nurse, no appointment, no physiotherapist and no speech therapist—just a prescription and a sense that your life has fundamentally changed? That is not care; that is neglect.

Again, there is hope. The Parky charter calls for a Parkinson’s passport, and it is possible that the foundations for that already exist in the pioneering Parkinson’s Connect programme. That programme allows clinicians to refer patients directly to the full network of support that Parkinson’s UK offers, from specialist nurses to peer support groups, helplines and tailored advice. It is low-cost, high-impact and, crucially, scalable. When the Minister responds later in the debate, will she agree to meet Parkinson’s UK to explore how Parkinson’s Connect can be scaled across the country? It is the type of innovation that our health system needs: solutions that empower people and relieve pressure on the NHS simultaneously.

The fourth strand of the Parky charter is comprehensive care. People with Parkinson’s should not be lost in a bureaucratic labyrinth while their condition worsens. Governments across the UK could deliver a diagnostic

[Graeme Downie]

pathway that guarantees access to a Parkinson's specialist within 18 weeks of referral—not occasionally, not when it is convenient, but every single time. That manageable goal aligns with existing National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines. I urge the Minister to consider that the NHS long-term workforce plan must deliver the neurological professionals and Parkinson's specialist nurses that this country urgently needs. We must remember that delays in diagnosis and care lead to irreversible deterioration, and the cost is not just human, but financial. Parkinson's costs the UK an estimated £3 billion a year, much of which is avoidable through better care and early intervention.

I recently spoke with a clinician who was emphatic in his view that people with Parkinson's need to be able to access specialist services easily. In turn, those specialist services need to be able to recognise when advanced therapies, such as apomorphine infusion, Produodopa and deep brain stimulation, may be helpful. Critically, patients must be able to access them easily and equally. Compared to our European counterparts, this clinician's view was that we do not use those advanced therapies as much as we should.

Despite there being no lack of ambition in Scotland, we are lagging behind on interventions such as deep brain stimulation, which can be hugely impactful on people's quality of life. There is scope and there is hope to grow the provision for deep brain stimulation in Scotland, but we need to see urgent action, attention and focus to make that a reality.

We cannot talk about comprehensive care without acknowledging the dedicated but wildly overstretched workforce. Our health professionals do heroic work, but they are overstretched. Today, we are 100 full-time equivalent Parkinson's nurses short of what is needed. Only 44% of people with Parkinson's have access to occupational therapists, only 62% have access to physiotherapists and just 40% have access to speech and language therapists, despite the fact that Parkinson's affects speech and swallowing so acutely. We must do better. The NHS across the UK must invest in this multi-disciplinary workforce that enables people with Parkinson's to live well.

Investing in the Parkinson's workforce is not just the humane thing to do, but the economically smart thing to do. We also need to make sure we are spending smarter in Scotland. It has been 14 years since the Christie commission talked about the urgency of reform for public services to make progress on preventive spend to improve outcomes for patients. That commission was started by a different political party from my own, but it was absolutely the right thing to do, and its findings were welcomed across the political spectrum.

However, despite that working consensus, here we are 14 years later, still making the same arguments for change. I hope that during her speech the Minister will confirm that the forthcoming NHS 10-year plan will make a similar commitment on preventive spending, but with more of an outline about how we will deliver that change of funding priorities, unlike the promises that we have seen in Scotland.

I will move on to talking about personal independence payments and the cost of living with Parkinson's. Beyond the NHS, our support systems are failing people with

Parkinson's. The average person with Parkinson's incurs extra costs of £7,500 a year, and when lost income is factored in, that rises to more than £22,000 annually. PIP is intended to offset those costs, yet Parkinson's claimants are 10% more likely to be incorrectly assessed than those with other conditions. We know that the status quo of assessment and award for PIP is unfit for purpose and that reforms are necessary. Campaigners have welcomed some of the moves in the recent Green Paper published by the Government.

However, the Government's proposals to tighten PIP eligibility—for example, by requiring a minimum four-point score in one daily living category—would miss the bigger picture for people with Parkinson's, and could deny support to many who are profoundly affected by their condition and who rely on this working-age benefit to underpin the quality of their life. As part of that necessary reform, I urge the Minister to work with colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions to consider submissions from organisations, including Parkinson's UK, in pursuing reform of this broken system. A Labour model of welfare support should start from a position of considering the individual and be a system that embraces the principles of dignity, fairness and respect.

Let me draw my speech to a close on a note of hope from the charter's fifth demand: the quest for a cure. We stand on the brink of transformative discoveries. We have scientists and there is momentum, but what we need now is funding. The UK is already leading the way in innovative research. The Edmond J. Safra Foundation's "accelerating clinical trials in Parkinson's disease" platform trial is hosted by University College London, and supported by the National Institute for Health and Care Research and Parkinson's UK. It is a global first—a multi-arm, multi-stage trial that fast-tracks promising treatments. The Government have invested £4.6 million, which has leveraged an additional £3.8 million in overseas funding and catalysed a £16 million programme, but I urge them to go further. A national registry, modelled on successful schemes in the US, could connect patients to clinical trials more effectively. Better data would mean better, faster and more inclusive research.

We will not find a cure without involving people living with Parkinson's in trials, and they are willing. As one participant, Helen, put it to me:

"You're not doing it for you. You're doing it for future generations."

The Government's £20 billion R&D pledge is welcome, but a condition that costs the economy £3 billion a year and affects more than 150,000 people cannot remain under-prioritised. Will the Minister commit to meeting Cure Parkinson's and Parkinson's UK to discuss how targeted investment can turn hope into reality?

Let me return to the voices that brought us here. The Parky charter is not a wish list; it is a manifesto for dignity. Its reasonable and fair demands offer us a clear and achievable path forward: speedier diagnoses, informed and empowered patients, co-ordinated care, comprehensive support and determination that we will find a cure. These are not luxuries; they are necessities for dignity and survival. We owe it to those living with Parkinson's now, and to those who will be diagnosed tomorrow, to act decisively. This is the moment when we can turn awareness into action, and pledges into progress.

I particularly thank my office staff member Vonnice Sandlan, who not only brought this issue to my attention but conducted much of the research for my speech.

She has educated me and, I hope, others about the importance of tackling Parkinson's effectively and in a co-ordinated manner, and allowed me to hear some of the incredible stories to which I have referred today. I look forward to hearing the various contributions from Members on both sides of the House, and the Minister's response.

12.12 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) for securing this debate and the Backbench Business Committee for allowing it, and I also thank him for the eloquent way he addressed the issue. I do not think I disagreed with him on a single thing. At the risk of repeating some of what he said, I will try to explain why I am standing here today.

To be honest, because I had seen the stories of Michael J. Fox and Muhammad Ali, I was previously of the opinion that a huge amount of progress had been made in dealing with Parkinson's disease. I was recently invited to meet people at the Parkinson's Café in Balsall common in my constituency, where I had a moment of clarity—as Members of this House, we all go through such moments—and understood that there is a huge gap. There were about 30 carers and people suffering from Parkinson's, who spoke about their conditions eloquently and bravely. This is a really timely debate on a day when many of us will have demands on our time, given the local elections, and it is a great privilege to speak.

As the hon. Member said, Parkinson's is a hugely debilitating disease. Although a disproportionate number of people get diagnosed in their later years, there is no minimum age threshold, as we saw in the case of Michael J. Fox—in fact, I think he was diagnosed at the age of 29. Parkinson's can lead to sensory issues, voice changes, facial masking and, of course, movement issues. It really is a significant, life-altering condition, which obviously affects not just the individual but the people around them.

I have been astonished to see the lack of care and support for people with Parkinson's, for which there are a number of reasons. The Parky charter has some reasonable and legitimate requests, to which I certainly lend my support. I will work with the Government and support their endeavours in this area, because there are about 153,000 people in the UK who suffer from Parkinson's. We have a significant number across the borough of Solihull.

I had the pleasure of meeting Jane Lindsay, who was diagnosed with Parkinson's in 2019, and a lot of the things that she told me relate directly to the requests in the Parky charter. After receiving a diagnosis and leaving hospital with her husband, Jane did not know anything about the disease. She said to me, "I just wasn't sure where this will all lead me." There was a significant lack of support and information, so Jane, who had been in the teaching profession for almost 40 years and spent 17 years as a headteacher, decided that she was going to do something about it. With the help of local GP Sally Frank, she set up the Balsall Common Parkinson's café in 2022—the date will not be lost on people, as it was at the height of covid. She found that being in touch with other sufferers of Parkinson's was a "lifeline" because, as the hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar said

when he recited a poem, she knew people who walked in the same shoes and who shared the same experiences and concerns.

Initially, there were only six members of the group, but it has now expanded to at least 30. They are very lucky, because they meet regularly in the church hall, where they get the facilities for free. I commend the church for offering that support. Jane, her husband and GP Sally Frank, along with friends and family, have done an immense amount of work to raise awareness and funds. They have done charity walks, golf days, sponsored half-marathons, afternoon teas, balls, comedy nights, quizzes and croquet games. They have raised over £230,000, which is really valuable.

However, only four of the 30 people at the Balsall Common meeting that I attended had the support of a Parkinson's nurse, which shows the sheer need for the specialist care that is required. The chair of the Solihull branch of Parkinson's UK, Martin Sewell, said:

"This is a great opportunity for us to reach more people affected by the condition in the Solihull area with information and support".

He specifically thanked the people of that Solihull village, who are able to meet in such a marvellous location at the heart of the community.

I turn to the Parky charter. The hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar mentioned the workforce, which is clearly a really acute issue. That is demonstrated by the fact that only four of the 30 people at the meeting had access to a relevant nurse. I would really welcome the Minister's reflections on how the NHS long-term workforce plan, which the Conservatives instigated when we were in government, will help to give more support to sufferers of Parkinson's.

As the hon. Member mentioned, there is a significant lack of data on Parkinson's. I tried to get the figures for how many people in my constituency suffer from Parkinson's from the House of Commons Library. We were given the waiting lists for neurology departments, but the number of Parkinson's sufferers was not reported or published anywhere. That is a fundamental issue that I would encourage the Government to look at, and it should certainly be addressed at the very first instance. Some 55% of those waiting for neurological referrals wait more than 18 weeks, so a significant number of people have to wait for a very long time. Those who, like Jane, have very little information are in effect left to their own devices to figure out the next step.

I greatly support the Parkinson's passport, which the Parky charter calls for, not least because it would provide instant access to a blue badge and to free prescriptions. This seems to me to be a logistical or operational need, so if a doctor is able to assess someone and say that they have Parkinson's, that should set the individual down a neurological pathway that allows this stuff to happen almost instantly. It is something that people with Parkinson's should not have to worry about. We know how debilitating the disease is, how people will deteriorate and that there is no cure—such individuals are set down that path—so we should look to alleviate some of their concerns.

The hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar mentioned PIP, and one of the things raised with me at the café was the issue of reassessments and of having to go through all that again. If the reassessments are to see how the individual has deteriorated and what further support needs to be given, that is different from having

[Saqib Bhatti]

to go through the rigorous PIP reassessment to see if they are still entitled to it, which is really stressful for people who are already in a very stressful situation. I would greatly support anything that can be done about that, because PIP, certainly in this instance, is a basic lifeline to maintain a level of wellness. I would be interested to hear the Government's thinking, because while there has been a lot of talk about PIP encouraging people into work, we know that these people are only going to deteriorate, so what support can be given?

The real question here is about research and development. I know that the Government have committed £20 billion to R&D funding, but I would be interested to know what their thinking is about supporting the treatment of Parkinson's. The hon. Member mentioned this, and I join his call for more funding in this field. I did not realise that a lot of the treatments were developed 50 or 60 years ago and that there has been very little progress since, so I would very much support any increase in funding.

My remarks have been limited because the hon. Member went through the issues comprehensively, and I thank him for doing so. To steal one of his lines, the Parky charter is really a manifesto for dignity. Probably all of us across the House would agree that we do this job to help the most vulnerable, so if we can make changes to give these individuals dignity, I will certainly support them.

12.22 pm

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) for securing this important debate. Parkinson's UK tells me that there are about 230 people living with the condition in my constituency of Stirling and Strathallan. Across Scotland, almost one in six people with Parkinson's are under 65 and one in three are over 80, which is a reminder that this condition affects people of all ages.

One of those people is my constituent John Lange, who was diagnosed in 2006 at the age of just 43. In 2012, John co-founded the Forth Valley Young Parkinson's group as a space for people of working age to share experiences and support one another. In 2014, John and his wife, Anne, opened a small fundraising shop in St Ninians. Over the last decade, that shop has grown into a well-known charity business in Stirling city centre, raising thousands for Parkinson's UK and Parkinson's research. It's called Something Old Something New, and I would encourage anyone visiting Stirling to drop by Murray Place and see the brilliant work John and Anne are doing.

Parkinson's is a condition that affects not just the body, but a person's independence, confidence and ability to stay connected, so while treatment is crucial, having the right support networks in place matters just as much. Parkinson's UK supports over 45 local groups across Scotland and works with more than 300 volunteers. These groups provide everything from exercise and dance classes to singing and art sessions, helping people to stay active and feel part of a community that understands what they are going through.

In Stirling and Strathallan, we have seen that community spirit in action. MXP Fitness, a local gym, runs boxing sessions designed specifically for people with Parkinson's,

with support from Parkinson's UK's physical activity grant programme. These sessions, led by former Stirling Albion player Craig Comrie, are all about building strength and mobility in a safe and supported way. As Craig put it to the *Stirling Observer* recently:

"No-one is getting knocked out...no one is Tyson Fury!"

However, the benefits are real, and the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.

For those who prefer football to boxing, the Stirling Albion Foundation has just launched a new walking football session for people living with Parkinson's. Held on Tuesday mornings, the sessions promote movement, co-ordination and connection. From what I hear, there is a lot of laughter, too. I want to thank the team at Stirling Albion not just for this new initiative, but for their wider work across the community. I also wish them a very happy 80th birthday in 2025.

These activities—the boxing, the football, the local fundraising—are all examples of how communities are stepping up to support those living with Parkinson's. It is uplifting to see such creativity and compassion at a local level, and I know that is replicated in communities right across the United Kingdom.

I want to mention a remarkable local figure, my constituent Kay Mair. This year marks the 35th anniversary of Parkinson's nurses, whose specialist knowledge and experience make a huge difference to patients and families. Kay is one of the longest-serving Parkinson's nurse specialists in Scotland, having worked in the field since 1996. She is NHS Forth Valley's lead nurse for Parkinson's and a founding member of the Alliance of Scottish Parkinson's Nurse Specialists. Last month, she was invited to St James's Palace for tea with the Duchess of Gloucester in recognition of the incredible work she has done for nearly three decades.

Kay is exactly the kind of specialist nurse we need more of, which is why investment matters for the treatment of Parkinson's and for the NHS in general. In England, the Labour Government committed almost £26 billion to the NHS in the recent Budget, and that is already starting to make a difference. Since the election, there have been an additional 3 million appointments, with waiting lists falling by nearly 50,000 in deprived areas, which is helping people get back to work, back to their lives and back to health.

In contrast, in Scotland, despite a record Budget settlement, one in six Scots is waiting for care and over 100,000 have waited for more than a year. These are not just numbers; they are our neighbours, friends and constituents who are left in limbo by a system that needs urgent attention. NHS staff across Scotland are doing their best, but they are being let down by a lack of strategic leadership and long-term planning by a poorly performing SNP Scottish Government.

While the challenges are real, so too is the determination of communities across the country to meet them. I pay tribute to Parkinson's UK for the incredible work it does, not just in supporting people and raising awareness, but in campaigning for better services and leading research into a cure. I also thank all those working behind the scenes, such as the researchers striving for breakthroughs, the nurses delivering expert care and the many volunteers bringing energy, kindness and hope to their communities every day. I also want to recognise the thousands of individuals who raise money by undertaking personal

challenges all around the country and internationally. My constituency Kim Somerville from Auchterarder has recently returned from an eight-day trek across Costa Rica, which has raised more than £3,000 for Parkinson's UK.

Parkinson's may be a tough diagnosis, but thanks to people like John, Anne, Kay, Craig and Kim, and the team at Parkinson's UK and all the staff in our NHS, no one has to face it alone. Together, we can build a future in which everyone affected by Parkinson's feels supported, empowered and heard.

12.28 pm

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): First, I thank the hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) for securing this important debate. I agreed with everything he said in his excellent speech, except for one small thing. Given the importance of the topic, I was shocked to find that the last time Parkinson's was debated was in 2017. My researchers may be wrong on that point, but that is what I am led to believe. I hope this discussion is of such a calibre that it will make up for the long time since we had that debate. All my remarks today are entirely in the spirit of cross-party co-operation. I have no intention whatever to make any cheap party political points, either in relation to the UK or to Scotland.

I had a career in health and social care of more than 30 years, 17 of those as a commissioner and a regional director. I have to say, to my eternal shame, that Parkinson's rarely got a look-in when we looked at physical disability and sensory impairment. Of course it did, but not to the extent that it should have.

I pay tribute to those who are living with Parkinson's and to their families. As has been said, the condition affects around 153,000 people in the UK, including at least 257 people in my constituency. I also pay tribute to the volunteers who do tireless work to support people living with Parkinson's. Parkinson's UK does incredible work to support those across the UK and in my constituency, where it runs support groups in both Peterhead and Fraserburgh. Tasha Burgess from Parkinson's UK has done amazing work, particularly for me today, and I know that she might consider extending the work of those support groups to Banff, Macduff and Buckie in the western part of my constituency. The groups are vital to delivering support in the community. Just knowing that there is a support network nearby of people going through the same thing, staffed by knowledgeable volunteers, makes such an incredible difference to people going through what can be the hardest time of their lives.

Research has been mentioned. It is right that research funding goes to areas such as cancer, diabetes and motor neurone disease, but sadly Parkinson's is the poor cousin in that regard. The hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar pointed out that it is the fastest-growing neurodegenerative condition in the world, yet Parkinson's UK tells me that there is no treatment to stop or slow down the condition, only to deal with the symptoms. That is something that this Parliament must address.

I want to focus minds in the Chamber today on how the benefits systems treats people living with Parkinson's. Many Members have already raised concerns about changes to PIP eligibility announced by the UK Government in March. It goes without saying that the

changes may have a severe and negative impact on those living with Parkinson's. That can be contrasted against the adult disability payment introduced by the Scottish Government, which replaced PIP.

People with Parkinson's and those involved in the application process have reported that the ADP assessment is much more accurate and compassionate than that for PIP. Importantly, the ADP application uses paper-based evidence, as opposed to an in-person assessment, which is reported to poorly serve those living with Parkinson's. The issues of face-to-face assessments stem from neither assessors nor the criteria being able to capture the reality of a condition that fluctuates as heavily as Parkinson's.

I am sure the Minister is paying attention to me, but I am aware that when the work capability assessment was dropped from universal credit assessments, the Westminster Government did not communicate that to the Scottish Government. I am hopeful that going forward there will be a better level of communication between the Governments in that regard. In March 2023, the Work and Pensions Committee, reporting on health assessments for benefits, stated that

“when the Scottish Government publishes its planned evaluation” — on ADP—

“DWP should learn from the results and consider what changes, if any, it should make to its benefit assessments.”

I would be keen to hear the Minister's thoughts on that in her closing remarks.

The principles embedded within our welfare system should be a matter of principle for all MPs. We need to prioritise systems that treat people with the dignity and respect they deserve. There is an opportunity to learn from the Scottish Government's approach to disability benefits. I strongly encourage the UK Government to consider replicating our approach in Scotland to deliver better outcomes for those living with Parkinson's.

12.34 pm

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) for securing this important debate and for his eloquent speech. There was not a word that I would disagree with. As he described, Parkinson's is the fastest-growing neurological condition in the world and around 153,000 people live with the condition in the UK.

In April, we marked World Parkinson's Day and Parkinson's Awareness Month. As part of Parkinson's UK's event here in Parliament, I had the opportunity to hear directly from people affected. I am especially grateful to Angie, from Parkinson's UK, for taking the time to share her experience with me, and discuss how we can improve care and support for people living with Parkinson's disease. It is for people like Angie in Hertford and Stortford that I wanted to contribute to today's debate. For me, as I know will be the case for other hon. Members, it is personal. Through the experiences of friends and loved ones, I have seen at first hand the impact of a Parkinson's diagnosis. I would like to briefly share their stories today.

First, the mum of one of my closest friends was diagnosed with Parkinson's in 2018, a person whom it would be no exaggeration to describe as one of the warmest, kindest and most generous people you could meet—the kind of mum who makes you feel like part of

[Josh Dean]

the family and always insists you stay for dinner. She, too, has benefited hugely from the Movers and Shakers group. With the support of Parkinson's UK, she and a group of friends—all working-age people diagnosed with Parkinson's—set up the Herts Parkinson's wellbeing directory. Working with the NHS and other local organisations, their work ensures that Hertfordshire residents diagnosed with Parkinson's can quickly and easily find information and access local support to help them manage their condition. Residents can access their directory by visiting hertfordshire.parkinsonsuk.group. I thank them for their inspirational work supporting others with their diagnoses.

I also want to talk about Andy. When I first met Andy, he was introduced to me as the husband of my local Labour party's long-standing—or perhaps long-suffering—election agent, Brenda. I was about 19 at the time, standing in a local council election, in what used to be true blue Hertfordshire, that I was destined to lose. Little did I know just how important Andy and Brenda would be to me by the time I was elected to this place in July last year. In so many ways, I would not be stood here today as the Member of Parliament for Hertford and Stortford were it not for Andy and Brenda.

When I was preparing for this debate, I reflected on the fact that I could not pin down when or how Andy had told me about his Parkinson's diagnosis. That is a testament to Andy's innate ability to turn topics that others might find difficult to discuss into everyday conversation—indeed, I learned much about myself through simple conversation while travelling from visit to visit with him during the general election—but it is also a testament to his willingness to speak openly about his Parkinson's, breaking down the stigma for others with a diagnosis, and knowing that it does not define him and that it can make it easier for others to talk about their condition. Today, Andy Pellant is not just a mentor to me, but a friend. It is my privilege to put his name on the record in this debate.

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Julie Walker, who has been writing her regular "Parkinality" column in our local newspaper, the *Bishop's Stortford Independent*, for the past seven years to help people to better understand life with Parkinson's. Diagnosed aged 44, every year Julie does something to mark Parkinson's Awareness Month in the hope that a cure will be found and that there will be no need for another. This year, Julie has compiled all the poems she has written about living with the condition into a book, with the proceeds going to Parkinson's UK and Cure Parkinson's. I encourage everyone in Hertford and Stortford, and in this Chamber, to support her work.

I would like to take this opportunity to highlight some of the positive work being done in our community to support those living with Parkinson's. I was really pleased to read this week that Everyone Active is partnering with Parkinson's UK for the fourth year running to provide residents with Parkinson's with free fitness memberships. That means patients in our community will be able to access gym facilities, swimming pools and exercise classes at Hartham leisure centre in Hertford and Grange Paddocks leisure centre in Bishop's Stortford, alongside up to three of their carers. I encourage any residents in Hertford and Stortford living with Parkinson's to take advantage of that support.

I welcome the work that this Labour Government are undertaking to deliver the 10-year health plan for England, which will radically reform how people in Hertford and Stortford with long-term conditions like Parkinson's are treated on the NHS. With hundreds of thousands of patients in England still on the waiting list for neurology services, and almost half waiting for more than 18 weeks to start their treatment, I similarly welcome how the elective reform plan will help to deliver more neurology appointments every year. No one should lay awake at night worrying that their condition is getting worse while they wait to see a specialist. By providing extra appointments, scans and operations in the evening and at weekends, I know this Labour Government will clear the backlog for neurology appointments. However, we can go further, and I do have a few policy questions I would like to raise; I would be grateful if the Minister could reflect on them in her response.

First, as other hon. Members have said today, a number of residents have written to me calling on the Government to implement the five steps set out in the Parky charter, which my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar set out eloquently. The points around speedy specialists, instant information, a Parkinson's passport, comprehensive care and a quest for a cure are incredibly important. I will touch on the Parkinson's passport, because a number of constituents have written to me raising the matter of free prescriptions, to which people with Parkinson's are entitled in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but not in England.

Supported by major Parkinson's charities, delivery of the charter would help to deliver timely diagnoses, comprehensive care and dignity for all those living with Parkinson's disease. I know the Minister takes these matters incredibly seriously and will have read the charter in detail, so I would be grateful if she could share what consideration she has given to it in her response.

When I spoke to Andy ahead of today's debate, he highlighted how almost everyone he has met with a Parkinson's diagnosis recognised that with the benefit of hindsight, the signs of their condition were present years before they were diagnosed. Has the Minister therefore considered the potential benefits of a national education programme to help people to identify the early signs of Parkinson's disease?

I know that hon. Members across the House will have their own experiences or will have known someone with Parkinson's disease. We have heard many moving speeches today, and I am sure we will hear more. The unity shown across the House today in support of those living with Parkinson's and in support of finding a cure is to be commended, and I am grateful for the opportunity to have contributed to the debate.

12.41 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) for leading the debate with such an emphatic and detailed speech. I also thank his staff for ensuring that all my office staff had access to the most up-to-date information on our constituencies; there was something the hon. Gentleman knew about my constituency that I did not know until his staff sent me that helpful information. It helps us all to consider the issues.

Parkinson's is a devastating condition that impacts thousands across the United Kingdom. I am pleased to be here to support this debate and to speak on this

subject, which is a big issue in my constituency; more people are moving to live in my constituency, who—by and large—are of a certain generation, and because of that, are more susceptible to Parkinson's, with other complex needs.

I want to speak specifically about PIP, which is a big issue for me and my staff; I have one staff member who does nothing else most of the time. It is always important to me to represent my constituents, and, as DUP health spokesperson, these issues are very close to my heart.

We all know someone who has Parkinson's, whether it be a family member, a friend or someone else, and representing that is half the battle to achieve change. We have heard figures outlining the scope of this issue across our country. To give my local perspective, some 4,000 people have been diagnosed with Parkinson's across Northern Ireland, and the majority are aged 70 to 89. In my constituency, we have 229 people suffering with Parkinson's.

The most recognised impacts of Parkinson's include tremors, bradykinesia, instability and stiffness. People with Parkinson's can feel freezing cold nearly all the time, even when the rest of us feel warm. There are also many non-motor symptoms that people with Parkinson's will face, including fatigue and cognitive changes.

I was pleased to attend Parkinson's UK's parliamentary drop-in earlier this month, where it was great to discuss the personal independence payment and how the changes will relate to people with Parkinson's. I have also submitted numerous parliamentary questions on the matter, highlighting the real scope of the issue. I have been contacted by many constituents expressing their concern for family members who have the disease. Parkinson's UK has revealed that people suffering from the disease incur extra costs of some £7,500 per annum on average; when loss of earnings is factored in, that figure can rise to £22,000.

Personal independence payments are therefore crucial to help with the additional costs that come with this sickness. PIP is not an incentive not to work—I get really quite annoyed when I hear people saying that. People want to work, but sometimes their disabilities restrict them from doing so. PIP is not means-tested, and is unrelated to a person's employment status.

The supposed change that has been discussed is that people will be eligible only if they score four or more points in one category, which will directly impact so many people who suffer a wide range of issues stemming from their illness. I have real concerns about the proposals that Government are looking to bring forward.

As the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) has referred to previously, people with Parkinson's are on average 10% more likely to be inaccurately assessed for PIP at the mandatory reconsideration stage than claimants with other conditions. That is shocking. When someone with Parkinson's makes a PIP application, the person who looks at it needs to understand the condition. My office win almost 70% of all our mandatory reconsiderations and appeals. That is not a criticism of people, by the way—it is an observation, which tells me there is something wrong with how the applications are looked at.

Clearly, there is a call for social security provisions, especially for people with Parkinson's, which is being overlooked. I urge the Minister to look at this matter together with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. As always, that is meant as a constructive comment.,

I am a strong supporter of investing in research. Based at Queen's University Belfast, Parkinson's@NI is a collaborative hub that connects researchers, healthcare professionals and the local community. Such hubs are crucial in helping to improve the quality of life for people with Parkinson's. More funding will enable research in digital modernisation and make a pivotal mark on brain health research. There is so much work to be done. If we can all work together, we can do more to find a cure for diseases such as Parkinson's.

For Parkinson's Awareness Month, let us do all we can to support and progress better opportunities for people. I strongly urge the Minister to look at the issues around benefits and social security in particular. I look forward to working closely alongside colleagues across the Chamber, and Ministers, to lobby for more change and for better provision for people with Parkinson's.

12.47 pm

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) for securing this vital debate, for speaking so eloquently and for highlighting the work we still have to do and the shortcomings we still have to overcome. I also thank Members across the Chamber for making such moving and powerful speeches to make the point that we must do more.

Every hour, two people's lives are forever changed by a Parkinson's diagnosis. That is some 18,000 men and women every year receiving a diagnosis that casts a shadow over their future. One of those people is my constituent, Jagdeep—a husband, a father, a son, a brother. He shared with me that when he received his diagnosis, he broke down right outside the hospital. Jagdeep is a strong personality with strong physical attributes, with a black belt in karate. He grew up in the east end and is tough as nails, but Parkinson's broke him down that day.

Parkinson's Awareness Month provides a precious opportunity to raise awareness about these personal battles, to discuss how we can support our constituents with the disease and to spotlight the resilience of those with Parkinson's.

Today, I wish to share Jagdeep's story. Although Jagdeep's initial diagnosis was overwhelming, he told me how his faith anchored him and gave him the courage to turn this challenge into a mission of Seva, a Sikh principle of selfless service. In 2022, he raised £15,000 for Parkinson's UK, climbing Mount Kilimanjaro with his daughter. Two years later, he trekked the Annapurna circuit in Nepal, and, most recently, he travelled to Uganda to support those with Parkinson's. He has achieved great feats abroad. At home in Ilford he has achieved something even greater: he has built a community for those living with Parkinson's. Having taught martial arts for 35 years, he launched the Dopamine Warriors Boxing Club, a free weekly boxing class designed specifically for those with Parkinson's.

Exercise such as boxing has been proven to slow down the progression of Parkinson's. For the nearly 50 attendees coming to his classes from across east London, Jagdeep's club has proved a lifeline. Attendees come from all walks of life, backgrounds and ethnicities. These classes have become a space without stigma—a space where having tremors does not set people apart, and a space where people can connect with one another.

[Jas Athwal]

I have one story that particularly moved me. Jagdeep mentioned that a new attendee arrived at the class in a wheelchair as a result of his symptoms. By the end of his first session, he left the class on his own two feet. The camaraderie in the class gave him the encouragement that he needed to be able to stand up. I am glad that part of the Labour Government's 10-year plan for the NHS is shifting care into the community.

In his own corner of the world, Jagdeep is making that vision a reality. His classes demonstrate that although we may not yet have a cure for Parkinson's, we do have the ability to improve people's lives now, by building spaces, like the boxing club, to provide people with a sense of belonging, community and encouragement. We owe it to Jagdeep and to every other person battling this disease to match their courage with our action—by fighting for our NHS, by investing in our community care, and by ensuring that, regardless of a cure, no one faces Parkinson's alone.

12.52 pm

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): I wish to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) for securing this debate, which has been incredibly powerful and impactful. I also wish to thank the hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) for sharing that incredibly powerful and emotional story of Jagdeep's journey. I am sure that is something that will remain with many of us today.

I also thank my constituents who wrote to me to share their personal stories. It is often not easy to reach out to someone whom we do not know and whom we have never met before and share the most painful aspects of our life. Like my hon. Friends, I was shocked and surprised to hear that Parkinson's has never been fully debated in this Chamber—in 2017, there was an Adjournment debate on young-onset Parkinson's—but we are righting that record today.

Across the UK, 153,000 people are living with Parkinson's, more than 13,000 of whom are in Scotland. The condition often comes with a range of complex conditions, as we have heard, affecting speech, mobility and sleep. Some 30% of those living with Parkinson's also have dementia, which greatly impacts their care needs, yet far too many go without any information on the support services that are available after their diagnosis. Both those with Parkinson's and their caregivers experience a long and complex care journey, which all too often isolates them from society. We have already heard today about the significant and harrowing impact that that can have on mental health. The experience of Parkinson's disease is heartbreaking for us to hear about today, but it is even more difficult for those who have to deal with it and live with it, day in and day out.

When I think of Parkinson's, I recall someone whom I once knew many years ago. His road to diagnosis was long. He was a young man, a bowler, and was at the heart of his club both on the green and in the clubhouse. But it became clear that something was very wrong as he started to stumble and struggle to walk. That often led to hushed whispers of concern as to what could possibly be wrong in someone so young. He was unaware of what was causing the changes to his body, impacting

his mobility and co-ordination and, as a result, participation in the sport and the sporting community that he loved. These were in fact the early signs of young-onset Parkinson's, the symptoms of which can easily be misattributed to other illnesses.

Young-onset Parkinson's impacts one in 20 of those living with the condition. I saw at first hand how a lack of awareness of Parkinson's symptoms and young-onset Parkinson's can cause anxiety, confusion and distress and can result in delay in seeking help. This just highlights how important it is to have well-funded and comprehensive medical and community support for those living with Parkinson's, but, unfortunately, these stories are not unique. From constituents emailing us with their worries and personal stories from friends and family, we each know how devastating this disease can be.

Across Scotland, the situation is dire. The waiting times for diagnosis are deeply distressing, and over half of Parkinson's patients in the Borders, Ayrshire and Arran experience waits of over 48 weeks. In my constituency, covered by Forth Valley NHS board and NHS Lothian, wait times can be as long as 24 weeks for more than a quarter of patients. These waiting lists lead to delayed diagnoses, leaving many people struggling alone and without help. The symptoms can be frightening, and demand dedicated support. It is imperative that the Scottish Government get a shift on. They need to use the record-breaking settlement from this Government to start to tackle those wait times, bring clarity to people at a time of great uncertainty and deliver the support that they need, because the condition goes beyond the physical.

I welcome this Government's investment to bring down neurology waiting lists to speed-up diagnosis times, but we cannot rest on our laurels because there is too much work to be done. By investing in research, improving healthcare access and fostering a supportive community, we can offer hope and improve the quality of life for many. As MPs, MSPs, and local representatives, it is our duty to ensure that those living with Parkinson's disease and their families have access to the best possible care and support. We must recognise that key milestones have been achieved by campaigners and research scientists to alleviate the pain and isolation caused by the condition. We must continue to raise awareness about Parkinson's disease, reduce the stigma and ensure that those affected feel heard, understood, and supported. The public awareness raised in recent years is so important to those facing years ahead with this disease. They must know that they are not alone and where they can access help.

I would like to share my gratitude for and commend the work of Parkinson's UK, which has been invaluable. We have heard much today about its fantastic work across the country. I would also like to recognise the advocacy of Billy Connolly and his bravery and honesty in talking about his diagnosis and his life with Parkinson's. He has shown his characteristic ability to broach even the darkest of subjects with humour, and he has that cut-through that can often be very difficult for some of us politicians to achieve. He has sparked a much-needed conversation.

Thanks to the event recently organised by my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar, I had the pleasure and privilege of meeting Dave Clark, former TV sports presenter and fierce advocate and successful fundraiser for Parkinson's UK. He took the time to speak to me about the unpredictability of his condition

and how it can change on a daily basis. We need to take these personal testimonies into account when considering any changes to the welfare system. Dave's experience reinforces the points we have heard today.

Finally, I am glad that this debate could take place in the Chamber, as the centre of our democracy. In this House is where support for those living with Parkinson's must be the loudest.

1.1 pm

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) on securing this important debate at the end of Parkinson's Awareness Month.

I would like to begin by paying tribute to my old friend and former colleague Margo MacDonald, SNP Member of this House briefly in the 1970s and Member of the Scottish Parliament for the SNP and as an independent from 1999 until her death in 2014. Anyone who knew Margo will remember that she was a force of nature and that anything she did was done with her typical determination, wit and good humour. I credit Margo with my limited understanding of Parkinson's and its variability, because for all the time she was in the Scottish Parliament she had Parkinson's, but it did not stop her being one of the most effective communicators and advocates for her constituency.

In my constituency, some 222 people are believed to be living with Parkinson's as we speak. I want to thank those who care for them—professionals, family members and volunteers alike—for their hard work and commitment. As we have heard, there is no cure for Parkinson's, and current treatment can manage only some of the symptoms. It can be a frightening disease, and one that can lead to depression and despair.

In Scotland alone there are approximately 30 new diagnoses every week. In 2024, Parkinson's UK in Scotland produced an excellent report called "Scotland Can't Wait". In the report, Parkinson's UK in Scotland highlighted the many challenges that people with Parkinson's currently face and the problems that will arise if the challenge of the increasing number of people being diagnosed is not addressed. The report drew on experience and robust data and makes some very important points.

It highlights that investing in professional staff who can offer the kind of specialist treatment that people with Parkinson's need would be an important step forward. Existing staff are already stretched, and if action is not taken soon they will be pushed to breaking point. Ensuring that people get the appropriate medication when it is needed, whether they are in hospital or at home, is also vital. Crucially, the mental health impacts of Parkinson's need to be addressed, including Parkinson's dementia, which can be frightening for patients and their families.

A recent freedom of information request revealed that since the year 2020, less than half a million pounds was spent by the Scottish Government on research into Parkinson's disease. By my calculations, that is something like £34 per person suffering from the disease in Scotland. That seems to me to be a woeful amount of money. I recognise that the effort to find a cure for Parkinson's will inevitably have to be a global exercise, and one that this Government, I am sure, will want to play a large part in. But everyone has to get their act together and

up their game, including the Scottish Government. At the end of the day, we want to find a preventive approach to Parkinson's, but a cure along the way would be helpful too.

Parkinson's UK in Scotland called its report "Scotland Can't Wait", and rightly so. The 30 people diagnosed every week cannot wait, and the 222 people in Glasgow West certainly cannot either. It is time for Governments on both sides of the border to act and work with Parkinson's UK and Parkinson's UK in Scotland to ensure that we do better for people with Parkinson's for their families and the staff who support them. Parkinson's UK has shown us the way; it is now time that we follow it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We now come to the Front Benchers. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

1.6 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) for bringing forward this important debate, and I thank all Members who have contributed. Everyone has made excellent contributions that were thoughtful and moving.

Right now in the UK around 153,000 people are living with Parkinson's, and that number is set to increase to 172,000 by 2030. Richard from Burgess Hill in my constituency is one of those many thousands. I count Richard as a friend; he is someone I greatly admire for his courage and tenacity. I was lucky enough to speak to him recently and get a brief insight into his life with Parkinson's. He told me that something he has noticed since his diagnosis is increased anxiety. He says that he now gets anxious about everyday things in a way that he never used to. He also said that the part of experience he has found most depressing is knowing that it is, in his words, "a one-way street", where his condition can only be managed by using ever-increasing levels of medication.

From even a short conversation with Richard, it is clear just how complex people's experiences can be. It is also clear to me that we need to do better, as many hon. Members have said, and that we have solutions already but we just need to get on with it. Parkinson's is the fastest-growing neurological condition in the world. It is progressive, it fluctuates, and it affects everything from movement, swallowing, sleep and speech through to mental health. There are over 40 symptoms, and each person's experience is unique. Half of those living with the condition, like Richard, experience anxiety or depression, and up to 60% can develop psychosis. They are also six times more likely to develop dementia.

Parkinson's UK has identified some of the major failings in care today. They include long waits for specialists, a lack of access to expert multidisciplinary teams, people not getting their medication on time in hospital, and limited mental health and dementia support. There is also a postcode lottery when it comes to advanced treatments such as Produodopa and deep-brain stimulation. Those failings have consequences: unplanned hospital stays, severe complications and worsening mental health. Parkinson's costs the UK an incredible £3 billion a year. In England alone, unplanned hospital admissions cost £277 million. So this is not only a health crisis but one with significant economic impacts.

[Alison Bennett]

I and my Liberal Democrat colleagues believe that the system must change urgently and that the Government have to act. First, we have got to fix the basics. To do that, we need to review the medicines supply chain. People with Parkinson's must get their meds on time. We also need to expand the MHRA's capacity, reversing the 40% workforce cut, and reducing the time for treatments to reach patients.

Secondly, we need to put care and support front and centre. We can do that by giving people with Parkinson's access to a named GP—someone who knows their story and their condition—and by making mental health a priority, not an afterthought. That means regular mental health check-ups, easier access to services through walk-in hubs and restoring the mental health and dementia care targets that the Government have abandoned.

Thirdly, the Government must step up and support carers. Behind every person with Parkinson's, there is often someone else who cares for them; someone who is quietly exhausted. We must provide respite breaks and ensure that carers have access to paid leave. We need to fix the broken social care system once and for all. It is time for those cross-party talks—no more delays. As I have said in this place before, we will clear our diaries to get those talks happening. This issue is simply too important for diary clashes. I wonder whether the Minister can give us any clarity and a date on those vital talks.

Finally, we have got to help people live and work with dignity. I and my Liberal Democrat colleagues are campaigning for: a new right to flexible work; better accessibility standards for public spaces; a stronger blue badge framework; the incorporation of the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities into UK law; and the closing of the disability employment gap. We can do that if we implement a dedicated strategy for disabled workers, simplify the application process and introduce adjustment passports so that workplace support follows the person, even if their job changes.

This is a health issue, an economic issue and a social justice issue. As others have said, it is about human dignity. We owe it to people living with Parkinson's that we must do better, not some day but now. Let us build a future where those with Parkinson's like Richard get the proper help and support they deserve.

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

1.12 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition in this most important debate. I commend the hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) for securing it and for his heartfelt and impassioned speech. I was particularly moved by the recitation of Bobbie's poem and the highlighting of the amazing "Movers and Shakers" podcast.

I thank all hon. Members for their heartfelt contributions on behalf of their constituents and those across the country living with Parkinson's. We heard inspiring stories such as that of Jagdeep, as raised by the hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal), and John and Anne of Something Old, Something New, as raised by the hon. Member for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane).

I note that, as a result of other events in the country, our debate has had a relatively Scottish flavour, but Parkinson's Awareness Month is UK-wide and a time to focus national attention on the condition that affects over 150,000 people here in the UK. That number that continues to rise. The disease impacts not just individuals but families, carers and communities. It challenges both body and spirit, demanding a comprehensive response from all sectors of society.

We often learn about Parkinson's from friends, family and colleagues, as was highlighted so powerfully by the hon. Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson). For me, it is a deeply personal issue. A close family member was initially diagnosed and treated for Parkinson's disease. More recently, that diagnosis was revised to progressive supranuclear palsy, or PSP, which is a rarer and unfortunately more aggressive condition. That journey from uncertainty to diagnosis and then living with a progressive neurological condition has profoundly impacted my family. I have witnessed at first hand the critical importance of early diagnosis, specialist care, emotional support and, above all, hope.

Since becoming a Member of Parliament, I have spoken to many constituents across Farnham, Bordon, Haslemere, Liphook and the surrounding villages affected by Parkinson's. I have been inspired by their bravery and strength in responding to the cruel difficulties that life has thrown at them.

Parkinson's has no cure, as hon. Members have said, and that is one of the many challenges that people and their loved ones face on diagnosis, but thanks to advances in research and medicine, there are ever improving treatments to help manage and relieve symptoms. As a result, many people with Parkinson's can have a normal or near-normal life expectancy. Physiotherapy, occupational therapy and medication can help relieve symptoms and enable people to stay living independently at home for longer.

In my constituency, people with Parkinson's have benefited from free membership of local leisure centres in Whitehill and Bordon and in Haslemere, helping them to keep active and manage their symptoms, but there is so much more to do, whether on research, diagnosis, treatment or—hopefully—a cure.

Last month, ahead of World Parkinson's Day, like the hon. Members for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I met Parkinson's UK and individuals affected by the condition. I heard powerful accounts from volunteers about the daily challenges they face from mobility issues and speech difficulties and the emotional toll on themselves and their families. I commend Parkinson's UK for its tireless work in providing advice, support and advocacy at every stage of the Parkinson's journey. Help is available via its website and helpline. I encourage anyone who needs support to reach out. However, as the hon. Member for Bathgate and Linlithgow (Kirsteen Sullivan) mentioned, there are still many who do not know what support is out there; that must change.

I praise the local charities and volunteers across my constituency and across the country, as raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), and the work they do. Like the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan), I have experienced working in healthcare, and during my tenure with the NHS Getting it Right First Time

programme I was involved in the publication of the neurology national speciality report. The analysis in that report highlighted significant variation in neurology services across England, particularly in managing conditions such as Parkinson's disease. Key conclusions included the urgent need for timely access to specialist neurology services, the development of standardised care pathways for chronic neurological conditions, the expansion of the neurological workforce, including advanced practitioners, and much better data, as my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) mentioned. Those recommendations are essential to reducing disparities and improving outcomes. Will the Minister commit to addressing those three priorities in more detail beyond general references to cutting waiting lists and updating the workforce plan?

Medical research in the UK is funded by both public and private sectors as well as charities and non-governmental organisations. In 2022, nearly £250 million was spent on neurological research including Parkinson's and other neurodegenerative conditions across 1,873 individual projects. Parkinson's UK and Cure Parkinson's alone contributed £2.6 million.

Under the previous Conservative Government, we invested more than £79 million in research into Parkinson's disease between 2019 and 2024. In 2022-23, the National Institute for Health and Care Research enabled 114 studies related to Parkinson's through its infrastructure. We also rolled out a new treatment for advanced Parkinson's disease through the NHS, starting in February 2024, offering an additional option for patients whose symptoms were no longer responding to oral medications. I would be grateful if the Minister would confirm the Government's plans to continue with that momentum. What research funding will be maintained or increased? What new treatment options are being supported or explored? We also made progress in workforce planning, recruiting record numbers of doctors and nurses, and publishing the first ever NHS long-term workforce plan. That plan recognised the need for more specialist nurses and clinicians in areas such as neurology. The new Government have committed to updating that plan. Will they therefore retain that level of detail and maintain the focus on specialist roles needed for Parkinson's care?

I want to raise constituents' concerns regarding recent shortages of medications, such as amantadine and apomorphine. That has real, distressing consequences for people trying to manage their condition. The Government have rightly acknowledged those supply constraints, but what action is being taken to restore and secure access to those medications? We have also heard concerns about the potential impact of President Trump's proposed pharmaceutical tariffs. What assessment has been made of the risks that could pose to access and affordability of Parkinson's treatments?

Turning to the Labour Government's record to date, I believe that Parkinson's has yet to be identified as a strategic priority. Will the Minister confirm what level of funding is being allocated to Parkinson's research this year and how that compares with recent years? There are also wider concerns about the implications of tax and benefit changes in the Budget, as the hon. Member for Strangford raised, including the national insurance rise. Many people with Parkinson's rely on social care services, which are not exempt from the national insurance rises. Has any assessment been made

of those extra costs for local authorities, charities and self-funders? Charities such as Parkinson's UK do extraordinary work, but they too are affected by those rising costs. How are Ministers engaging with the charity sector to understand how higher taxes and squeezed funding may threaten support services or reduce research investment?

We know that neurology waiting times are already among the longest in the NHS. Will the Minister outline a targeted plan to specifically address that? Will the Government also publish a long-term strategy for neurological conditions, including Parkinson's, with clear plans for service integration between the NHS and social care? A multidisciplinary, multi-agency approach is vital for people with Parkinson's to live full, independent lives.

Finally, what guarantees can the Minister offer that recent restructuring in NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care will not worsen access to Parkinson's services, delay initiatives or harm continuity of care? With 50% cuts to integrated care boards, will the Minister reassure people with Parkinson's and their families that they will not be disadvantaged?

The House is united in wanting to improve treatment, support and outcomes for people with Parkinson's. We hope that the Government will listen carefully to today's contributions and respond with clear commitments that include action on workforce, waiting times, integration, support for carers and access to research and innovation. Parkinson's is a relentless condition that robs individuals of independence and dignity, but with research, investment, compassionate care and community support, we can fight back. The Conservative party stands ready to work constructively with the Government and with Members from all parties to ensure that progress is not only continued but accelerated. Let us match awareness with action, for only with action comes hope.

1.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) for raising this important issue, and I congratulate him on leading the first substantive debate on Parkinson's in the House. I also thank all Back Benchers for their insightful contributions, which raised various issues. Although the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti), my hon. Friends the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson), for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane), for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean), for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) and for Bathgate and Linlithgow (Kirsteen Sullivan) and the Members for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) all raised various issues, it is fair to say that everybody who has spoken today, including those who made contributions from the Opposition Front Benches, have raised the importance of the voluntary and community sector and shared some powerful and important stories from their constituents.

April was Parkinson's Awareness Month and I pay tribute to the fantastic charities that make it a success: Parkinson's UK, Cure Parkinson's and The Brain Charity, to name but a few. In particular, I was moved to see how many people had contributed to the "Knit it Blue" campaign, sending in more than 500 beautiful knitted

[Ashley Dalton]

tulips. I also pay tribute to the Movers and Shakers, whose podcast is doing a fantastic job of raising awareness and advocating for better care and treatment for those living with Parkinson's.

Awareness campaigns really deliver results. We just need to look at the "Get It On Time" campaign, which has led to more than 100 NHS organisations pledging to improve the delivery of time-critical medication—raised a number of times in this debate—and is backed by resources and training materials commissioned by NHS England. We also now have the Parky charter, which is galvanising public and professional awareness of the needs of the Parkinson's community to ensure timely diagnosis, comprehensive care and dignity for all people with Parkinson's.

We recognise the challenges of living with Parkinson's and hear the calls from the Parkinson's community for more research, shorter waiting times for neurology appointments and more Parkinson's nurses and multi-disciplinary teams to deliver Parkinson's care. The Parkinson's UK website has given a voice to many patients living across the country, and I want to echo the comments made by Andrew in the west midlands that our Parkinson's nurses are

"worth their weight in gold."

Neurology is particularly challenging, and we need more neurologists and specialist nurses. There are initiatives nationally that support service improvement and better care for Parkinson's patients. NHS England's Getting it Right First Time neurology programme supports improvements to Parkinson's care by promoting data-driven approaches, sharing best practices and fair access to services. It focuses on improving patient experiences, shining a spotlight on disparities in care and calling for well-integrated processes, such as people getting their meds on time.

The NHS constitution handbook sets out that patients should start consultant-led treatment within 18 weeks from referral. NHSE published a new elective reform plan in January, setting out the steps towards meeting this target by the end of this Parliament, and we achieved our pledge to deliver an additional 2 million elective appointments between July and November 2024, compared with the same period in 2023, seven months ahead of schedule. That is a first step to delivering our commitment that 92% of patients will wait no longer than 18 weeks from referral to consultant-led treatment by March 2029.

The Department for Work and Pensions offers personal independence payments to individuals with health conditions or disabilities. However, there is currently no automatic entitlement to PIP in relation to any specific health condition except in cases of people nearing end of life. The Government recently brought forward a Green Paper on the health and disability benefits system and the support we offer entitled "Pathways to Work". In that, we consider how to improve the system for those with very severe health conditions and disabilities, which includes exploring ways to reduce the need for some people with severe health conditions to undergo a full PIP functional assessment. I am due to meet the DWP Minister next week. I will raise the issues that have been raised today with her, particularly by my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar, the hon. Member for Strangford and others.

The primary focus of the Department for Transport's blue badge scheme is to help those with the greatest mobility needs and it is not condition-specific. The blue badge eligibility criteria in England were extended in 2019 to include more people with non-visible disabilities, in order to ensure that people with the greatest needs, whatever their disability or condition, have access to a badge. There are several automatic qualifying criteria for a blue badge, such as being in receipt of certain benefits. People who do not automatically qualify due to receiving certain benefits may still be eligible, and local authorities will assess applications based on the information provided.

There are currently no plans to add to the list of conditions that give entitlement for free prescriptions. However, approximately 89% of prescription items are currently dispensed free of charge, and a wide range of exemptions are already in place. People with Parkinson's who are over 60 years old are entitled to free prescriptions, and for those who do need to pay, the cost can be capped by purchasing a prepayment certificate. In addition, the NHS low-income scheme can provide help with health costs on an income-related basis.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar asked me to meet several stakeholder organisations, and I am more than happy to meet them to discuss the Parky charter. I understand that Parkinson's Connect is being piloted with six healthcare teams in England and Scotland, with more planned in 2025. I would be pleased to discuss how the pilots are providing comprehensive support to people with Parkinson's on how they are progressing and on next steps.

NHS England's neuroscience transformation programme improves Parkinson's care by focusing on faster diagnosis, better co-ordinated care and improved access to specialist services. For example, it contributes to shifting our NHS from hospital to community and from analogue to digital through the home-based care pathway. That focuses on providing comprehensive support and care for individuals in their own homes, integrating remote monitoring through wrist-worn sensors, and providing symptom management advice and access to healthcare professionals. Empowering patients to manage their condition at home means we can improve their quality of life and, crucially, maintain their dignity and independence.

Last November, we established the Neuro Forum—a UK-wide, Government-led forum focusing on services and support for people affected by neurological conditions. It is the first of its kind and brings together the Department of Health and Social Care, NHS England, devolved Governments and health services, and neurological alliances across the UK to address gaps in treatment and care and to drive improvements in neurological health across the four nations. The forum will focus on practical things, such as a better understanding of neurological workforce challenges and help to address them; teaching other staff to provide better care for people living with one or more of over 600 neurological conditions including Parkinson's; sharing innovative solutions, such as new therapies; and, crucially, ensuring that patients' voices are heard.

Research has been touched on by many speakers. It advances our understanding of Parkinson's as we develop new treatments, technologies and management strategies. Today these things help people to live well with Parkinson's; tomorrow they could deliver a cure. The Government

are strongly committed to supporting research into Parkinson's disease. We continue to encourage research through targeted funding, infrastructure support, policy initiatives, and collaboration and partnerships. For example, the UK Dementia Research Institute, which is primarily funded by Government, is partnering with Parkinson's UK to establish a new £10 million research centre dedicated to better understanding the causes of Parkinson's and finding new treatments. The centre, supported by five of the National Institute for Health and Care Research's biomedical research centres, has discovered that eye scans can detect Parkinson's disease up to seven years before symptoms appear, enabling people to receive treatment and make any appropriate lifestyle changes earlier. I reassure the House that changes to the structure of NHS England and the Department will seek to eliminate duplication and improve efficiencies to ensure that work on Parkinson's continues to develop.

Research is, of course, crucial for discovering new drugs and underpins the entire drug discovery and development process. Produodopa is a groundbreaking new treatment for Parkinson's disease, particularly for patients with advanced disease and severe motor fluctuations. It is revolutionary because it provides a continuous 24-hour infusion of medication via a small pump, providing more consistent symptom control. The NHS rolled it out in February last year. It has been shown to improve motor function and has proved its worth by significantly improving the quality of life of those with advanced Parkinson's. I briefly remind colleagues that the NHS in England is legally required to make funding available for treatments recommended by technology appraisal guidance published by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence.

We all want to see people with Parkinson's live as well as possible for as long as possible. That is why it is not good enough that we still see inequalities in access to Parkinson's services. Neurology services have been facing real challenges, including in the workforce, delays to treatment and care, and a lack of information and support for patients. Through the forthcoming NHS 10-year health plan, we will improve care for people with long-term conditions like Parkinson's. In response to the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East, I can confirm that the plan will drive our ambition towards greater use of technology and data in the NHS.

A core part of the 10-year health plan will be our workforce and how we ensure that we train and provide the staff the NHS needs to make it more accessible, proactive and tailored for patients. The refreshed NHS workforce plan will set out the numbers of doctors, nurses and other professionals that will be needed in five, 10 and 15 years' time. It will reflect the fact that our NHS is caring for patients with increasingly complex needs.

However, we are already making progress on the workforce to support those with Parkinson's, including by having over 900 full-time equivalent consultants—over 30 more than in 2023. There are 27 specialised neurology

centres across England. As of January, over 7,700 full-time equivalent speech and language therapists are employed in NHS trusts—an increase of over 300 compared to last year. There are over 17,900 full-time equivalent occupational therapists—an increase of over 600. As of January, there are almost 25,300 full-time equivalent physiotherapists—over 900 more than last year.

We have also had a record increase in the carer's allowance. I do not have an update on the social care talks, but I will ensure that the Minister for Care hears that the matter has been raised in the debate.

I once again extend my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar for securing the debate and to all Members who have spoken. I look forward to working with them all to ensure that people living with Parkinson's have the dignity they deserve. I began by talking about Parkinson's Awareness Month. One thing that struck me from hearing so many people share their stories, and from the stories shared in the debate, was the number who felt uncomfortable sharing their status, sometimes even with their close friends and family. This past month has been about smashing the stigma, and I know that this debate will play its part in that too.

1.37 pm

Graeme Downie: I once again thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing the debate and hon. Members from all parts of the House for their contributions, which were often emotional—I thank them for sharing those stories.

A few themes came through, largely around the value of local volunteers and groups, beginning with the first intervention from the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). We then heard from the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) about Jane, from my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane) about John and Anne, and from my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean) about Angie. We also heard the especially emotional story of Jagdeep from my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal). Volunteer groups are vital to ensure that those with Parkinson's can live with their condition, and they provide incredible value. We should always be grateful for the volunteers who give up their time. We also heard about the value of and impact on families, which I mentioned in my speech and which came through again in a range of hon. Members' speeches.

I thank the Minister for her response. I look forward to continuing to work with her and Members across the House, looking at the next steps for better diagnosis and better care, so that we can better support those with Parkinson's and their families, and towards one day having a cure for Parkinson's.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Parkinson's Awareness Month.

Prisoners of Conscience

1.39 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered prisoners of conscience.

Many Members would like to have been here today but unfortunately were unable to be because of other commitments. We know what those commitments are, given what is happening today across this great nation. Today we gather in this esteemed House not simply to address issues of the moment, but to reflect on the principles that define our humanity and on our collective moral obligations. It is an honour to have been involved in many such debates over the past 12 years. This topic—prisoners of conscience—is close to my heart and the hearts of many Members, some of whom are here, while others have unfortunately been unable to attend.

We speak not for ourselves but for the voiceless. I take seriously the tenets of my faith, as others do theirs. A verse that I often recall in times like this is Proverbs 31:8-9:

“Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

I know that those ideals are held by many Members, regardless of their religious persuasion. This issue calls on us to uphold our shared values and to support and assist those who are less fortunate than ourselves.

Prisoners of conscience, who live in a state of despair due to their faith or belief, are not criminals. They are doctors, teachers, artists, writers, pastors and journalists, and they are all people of faith. Their so-called crime is to think freely, to believe openly, to speak honestly. Prisoners of conscience are individuals who are in prison not for any crime but for their beliefs, their expression of thought or their unwavering commitment to their values. They are a testament to the human spirit's resilience against tyranny. It is important for us to remember that they are members of our global family—our brothers and sisters—and they are deserving of our advocacy and support.

Let us turn our attention to articles 18 and 19 of the universal declaration of human rights, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948. That pivotal document laid the foundations for our understanding of human rights worldwide. Article 18 states:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

Those words show clearly what article 18 means: freedom for people to express themselves in any way they wish in relation to their religious beliefs.

I welcome the Minister to her place. She always speaks well on these matters, and we very much look forward to her response. I do not think that she will be found wanting in relation to what we ask of her today. It is also a pleasure to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), and others who will contribute.

The rights of teaching, practice, worship and observance are not optional or cultural; they are universal. Yet in 2025, we stand here amid a global crisis of conscience. Thousands sit in cells, unjustly detained, tortured and silenced, merely for professing their faith or upholding

their convictions. That is not hypothetical; it is happening all day, every day, for many people. According to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, as of 2024 at least 72 Christians are either imprisoned or missing in four of the world's five communist countries: 52 are currently imprisoned in China, Cuba, North Korea and Vietnam, while the other 20 are missing. In North Korea alone, an estimated 80,000 to 120,000 individuals, many of whom are Christian, are detained in prisons.

Article 18 enshrines the fundamental right of individuals to hold their beliefs—whether spiritual, political or philosophical—and to express those beliefs freely and openly.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman, who always speaks with such compassion and conviction, is making a powerful case. One of the worst examples is the detention of Armenian prisoners of war by Azerbaijan. They have not broken any criminal code, as he says; they are public servants held for political purposes, with no clear legal redress or access, or even clear grounds as to why they are being held. Does he agree that international law should dictate here, not domestic politics, with Governments marking their own homework? I praise my constituent Annette Moskofian, who represents Armenians in the UK. The Minister can be assured that I will write to her with some of Annette's demands after the debate.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is right to mention the Armenians. If we go back even further, we remember what happened in the Armenian genocide. She outlines the case of those prisoners of conscience and prisoners of conflict in Armenia. I know that the Minister has taken note of that and will come back to the hon. Lady, who I thank for her intervention.

As we all know, thousands find themselves in prisons across the globe, not because they have violated laws but because they have dared to articulate beliefs that challenge powerful interests or unpopular narratives. They are individuals who stand firm in their convictions at great personal cost. I admire any person who takes a stand on something that they fundamentally and strongly believe in. It is unacceptable that in the 21st century, we continue to witness the persecution of such individuals. From China to Iran, and Russia to Nigeria, those who seek simply to express their beliefs and exercise their rights have faced unjust attention and oppressive action.

These are not isolated incidents. Unfortunately, they reflect systematic state hostility towards religion and belief, particularly under communist regimes. As Nobel laureate Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn warned in 1983:

“Hatred of God is the principal driving force”

behind communist policy. Militant atheism is not incidental; it is essential to communist control.

Let me be clear: such persecution is not limited to Christians. Shi'a and Sunni Muslims, Baha'is, Falun Gong practitioners, Hindus, Jews and many others face repression across the globe. Freedom of religion or belief is a human right, not a privilege of one faith or nation. It is every individual's right. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief, I am honoured to discuss this topic. To help those individuals, I believe that we must make a stand against that injustice, which is why I asked

for this debate. We must remind those in power that voices of dissent, and freedom of thought, consciousness and religion, represent not merely an individual right but a foundation of democratic society, and that their offences are not going unnoticed. Today, we bring that to the attention of all the places across the world where this is happening.

Let us affirm our commitment to liberty by remembering the ongoing struggles faced by prisoners of conscience around the world. May we encourage our constituents and communities—mine encourage me every day—to keep those prisoners in their thoughts and prayers, while working together, through advocacy and informed action, to champion the values enshrined in article 18, and to promote the many benefits these freedoms bring to societies that uphold them.

Alongside article 18, we must consider article 19, which states:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

Opinion and expression are the bedrock of any vibrant society that wishes to do well and take people with it, in unison. They enable societies to grow and thrive. When we suppress dissent, we undermine progress. There are thousands of prisoners. How can we respond to those innumerable violations of human rights? How can we begin to make a difference? I often think of the analogy of the wee boy on the beach with the starfish. The adult says, “You can’t save them all.” The wee boy says, “But I can save this one.”

We have the power to advocate loudly and clearly not just for the release of prisoners of conscience, but for the root causes of this duress to be confronted and dismantled through sustained diplomatic pressure, international co-operation, and the strengthening of legal and institutional protections for freedom of religion or belief. It is our responsibility to challenge the environments, be they legal, political or ideological, that allow such injustices to persist and to ensure that no individual is ever imprisoned for living according to their conscience.

I call on the Government to prioritise the issue of freedom of religion or belief violations in diplomatic dialogues—I know our Minister does that, and I believe our Government do, but for the purposes of this debate, we seek that reassurance—particularly with states known for systematic abuse. I can think of many examples, including China, Russia, Iran and North Korea. We must sanction the individuals responsible for religious persecution, and we must fund and support civil society groups working to secure prisoner releases.

Let us stand united in our unwavering commitment to uphold the principles enshrined in the freedom to change religion or belief, if that is a choice. Together, let us be that voice for the voiceless and that hope for the hopeless. They will probably never see this debate, but they need to be reassured that we are speaking for them in the way that we should.

I would like to mention some of the thousands of prisoners of conscience who are currently held in this awful state. Let the record show we have not forgotten them. I just want to name them; I will not go into all the details, but it is important that we have them on record. They include Jimmy Lai, a pro-democracy activist and

media tycoon in Hong Kong, imprisoned for his advocacy of freedom of the press, and a British citizen—we have not forgotten about him; Sahar Mahdavi, an Iranian woman detained for participating in peaceful protests advocating for women’s rights—my Ulster Scots accent will destroy these names; Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, a Nigerian gospel musician sentenced to death for allegedly blasphemous lyrics in a song shared on WhatsApp; Renagul Gheni, a Uyghur woman detained in China for practising her faith; Mojdeh Falahi, an Iranian Christian convert imprisoned for her religious beliefs; Cao Thi Cuc, a Vietnamese Christian leader arrested for her religious activities; Y Pum Bya, a Montagnard Christian from Vietnam detained for his faith; Mahvash Sabet, a member of the Baha’i community in Iran, imprisoned for her religious beliefs; Nguyen Bac Truyen, a Vietnamese human rights lawyer and religious freedom advocate imprisoned for his activism; Maira Shahbaz, a Pakistani Christian teenager abducted and forced into a marriage and conversion, now seeking asylum; Mubarak Bala, a Nigerian humanist sentenced to 24 years in prison for blasphemy—his faith and his right to hold his views is as important as all the rest; Abdulbaqi Saeed Abdo, a Yemeni Christian convert imprisoned for his faith; Naser Navard Goltapeh, an Iranian Christian convert sentenced to 10 years in prison for “acting against national security”; and Leah Sharibu, a Nigerian schoolgirl abducted by Boko Haram and held captive for refusing to renounce her Christian faith.

Most recently, I have looked at the case of the continued imprisonment of Chinese dissident Dr Wang Bingzhang, founder of *China Spring* magazine, a leader of the overseas China pro-democracy movement and a permanent resident of the United States. Dr Wang Bingzhang was kidnapped while travelling to Vietnam in 2002, taken to the People’s Republic of China and sentenced to life imprisonment for his activism after a trial that lasted half a day and was closed to the public, where he was denied the right to due process and a fair trial. He has been held in solitary confinement throughout his 23 years in prison, and his physical and mental health have seriously declined.

The United Nations working group on arbitrary detention declared that

“the detention of Wang Bingzhang is arbitrary, being in contravention of articles 9, 10 and 11 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights”.

Congressional resolution 326 in the 108th United States Congress of 2003-04 resolved that Dr Wang Bingzhang

“is being arbitrarily detained in the People’s Republic of China in violation of international law”.

It is quite clear that he should be released, and he has been in prison for 23 years. The international case is clear, and we should co-ordinate with the Government of the United States in efforts to seek the release of Dr Wang Bingzhang and his safe, immediate and unconditional return to the United States from the People’s Republic of China. Could he be one of the starfish saved? While acknowledging that we cannot save them all, we can save some.

We must keep hope alive, and I hope that this debate will keep that hope alive for all those people. As Luke 4:18 reminds us:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...to proclaim liberty to the captives and...to set at liberty those who are oppressed”.

[Jim Shannon]

Let us proclaim that liberty and not forget the daily plight of prisoners of conscience, alongside faith groups, international allies, non-governmental organisations and parliamentarians worldwide, because this is not just the UK's fight—this is the world's fight; it is humanity's fight for every one of those people.

The House is aware that my private Member's Bill, the Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief Bill, is scheduled for Second Reading. I have introduced this Bill because I believe we can do more. Today, as I think of prisoners of conscience, I also think of the persecuted Church of Christ and those who are persecuted simply because of their faith across the world. We cannot save them all, but we can do more to save some. I look to the Government to stand up, stand alongside them and send a message that the treatment of the human rights of those who are a minority will impact on trade deals, our Government aid programmes and all aspects of international involvement.

This is about one thing alone: freedom—freedom to express ourselves, in the way that we have the right to in this country. It matters to a prisoner of conscience; it matters to the families; it matters to the politicians; and it matters to this House. I hope the Minister and the Government will take the opportunity today to show that it also matters to them.

1.56 pm

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): It is an enormous privilege to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is a tremendous advocate for the voiceless. May I begin by reiterating the importance of the questions that he has raised and by asking the Minister to address in her winding up the question of what action has followed the telephone call between the Prime Minister and President al-Sisi on the question of pursuing the release of Alaa Abd el-Fattah? Is there any plan for securing the release of Jimmy Lai?

We have had many prisoners of conscience of our own. At random, off the top of my head, I could name Thomas More, Dr Barnes, Latimer and Ridley, Cranmer, Archbishop Laud, and even John Bunyan in Bedford jail. A free Parliament that had the will to do so could have campaigned for their release, and history might have been significantly different. The problem for us now is that the prisoners of conscience are well beyond our jurisdiction, so when we raise cases with Ministers, often enough we have no leverage whatsoever with the jurisdictions that have imprisoned them. We can no longer simply deploy the Royal Navy, as we might have done in the past, and as indeed we did when we deployed it to eradicate the scandal of the international slave trade.

Even in those jurisdictions where we do have alliances, shared national interests and good diplomatic relations, often enough Governments have bigger fish to fry with respect to regional security and stability, and international trade, so when we raise cases with Ministers, we are told, "These were raised at the highest level"—indeed, when I was a Minister, I raised them at the highest level—but not much action follows.

Are we wasting our breath? Are we wasting the House's time? This is not a counsel of despair. It is essential that we continue to do as the hon. Member for Strangford has done: to persevere. We have to try—we

have to try to lift the odd starfish, as he says. At the very least, we will have sent a powerful message to those prisoners, their relatives and their friends that they are not forgotten, that we do campaign for them and, indeed, that we pray for them.

We are reminded in chapter 12 of the Acts of the Apostles that St Peter, guarded by four squads and chained between two soldiers, is sprung by an angel. In chapter 16, Paul and Silas are sprung in an earthquake and end up evangelising the prison governor. Until those miraculous days return, however, we are confined to continuing to raise matters with Ministers.

Accordingly, I raise the case of Ali Minaei, a young man in Iran who has been in prison for the last year. He was sentenced for having attended a church service in somebody's home. He also has a severe heart condition. He is denied medical treatment in prison, and has been subject to beatings, including blows to his chest. It is not untypical for Christians in Iran to be sentenced for crimes against state security, to be given long sentences, to have prolonged interrogation, sexual harassment, and beatings, or to be denied privileges that other prisoners have access to.

I see young Ali as an archetype for all those prisoners of conscience that my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford mentioned, be they imprisoned for advocating for human rights, for their insistence on freedom of expression, or because of their adherence to a minority faith, and whether they be imprisoned in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, North Korea, Afghanistan, Turkey, Egypt, Venezuela or wheresoever.

I share a belief with my hon. Friend that there will be a day of liberation, when the prisoners will be freed. But that day of rapture will also be a day of wrath and judgment for their oppressors. We ought all to shrink from that judgment, because we share in the guilt of their tormentors through our inaction and by our silence.

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

2.2 pm

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate. We all agree that the number of Members able to attend in the Chamber today in no way reflects the importance we attribute to the issue; it has much more to do with the democratic processes happening in parish halls and on doorsteps across the country right now.

As Liberal Democrats, we stand firmly in solidarity with those imprisoned for their political views around the world. We believe that free speech and the freedom to organise are fundamental democratic rights, and those imprisoned for such causes are true symbols in the fight for democracy, free expression and the right to challenge Government policies. The free practice of religion should be a universal right for all people, everywhere. It is vital that we shine a light on religious persecution wherever we find it, and commit to opposing it with unwavering resolve. Many religious people globally face extreme forms of oppression, including threats to their very lives. We are deeply concerned by the lack of global action to safeguard religious freedoms, protect minority groups and uphold human rights. That must change.

Liberal Democrats have a proud history as strong defenders of freedom of religion and belief. Those are not just political positions; they are our core beliefs. Human rights and the rule of law stand at the very heart of what it means to be a Liberal Democrat. In our 2024 general election manifesto, we committed once again to protect, defend and promote human rights for all, including those persecuted for their religion or belief. We called for the appointment of an ambassador-level champion for freedom of belief, and increased funding for humanitarian aid and asylum support for those fleeing religious persecution. We firmly believe that liberalism and co-operation have a vital role to play in securing peace, promoting democracy, and defending human rights across the world. The UK must work with allies as a champion of freedom of belief.

Today, certain countries have notably high numbers of prisoners of conscience, often tied to political regimes, religious repression or authoritarian governance. In China, the Government's policies in Xinjiang have led to the mass detention of Uyghur Muslims in "re-education" camps, where they face torture and forced indoctrination. House Church Christians face harassment, arrest and imprisonment simply for practising their faith outside state control. The deliberate, systematic persecution of the Uyghur population meets the standard for imposing sanctions under the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018. We call on the Government urgently to issue their UK-China audit, to set out a clear approach that includes work to shine a spotlight on Beijing's human rights abuses.

Russia, under President Putin's increasingly authoritarian leadership, has seen a crackdown on opposition figures, journalists, and minority religious groups. Jehovah's Witnesses have been labelled an extremist organisation, leading to numerous arrests.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): In power there are balances of opportunity and risk, and one important point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) was that Ministers often have bigger fish to fry when dealing with international relations. From the hon. Gentleman's perspective, what is the right balance between standing up against human rights abuses, and maintaining and developing relations with emerging powers such as China?

James MacCleary: That is an important question—indeed, it is one of the questions for British foreign policy as we go forward. This is not just about China; we can also look at a country such as Türkiye at the moment, where we see clear oppression of political opposition, although Türkiye also plays a key role in the defence in Europe and the future of European security in relation to Russia. The hon. Gentleman is completely correct. It is not for me to tell the Government how to get the balance right, but any Government need to have a set of principles that they abide to, and to say, "This is the standard we are setting, and we apply it equally to everybody." Those of us in the room might come to different conclusions as to what those standards are, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I do not underestimate the compromises that have to be made by Ministers. Obviously I am not in that position, but some of us in the Chamber are, and I welcome the intervention.

In Russia, political dissidents and human rights activists have been persecuted—a clear example of that is the late Alexei Navalny, who died in prison on dubious and politically motivated charges. The hon. Member for Strangford mentioned Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who published the famous book "The Gulag Archipelago" in the 1970s. That was so dangerous to the Soviet regime that it was suppressed completely and banned in Russia—a great example of how freedom of expression can play an important role in bringing down entire regimes, however secure they may seem at the time.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): I declare my interest as an unpaid trustee of the Index on Censorship. Thinking specifically about regimes such as that in Russia, and the importance of allowing journalists, activists and others to achieve a level of freedom of expression in those very repressive regimes, what would the hon. Gentleman say about the support given via different Government agencies for people in those sorts of situations?

James MacCleary: That is an area of great importance, particularly in Russia, where the regime has now become so stifling that there is little freedom of expression at all within the country, and we do not see much—Alexei Navalny was a great example of Vladimir Putin completing his suppression of political opposition. It is fundamental for our Government to support voices for democracy and freedom across the world, and that is particularly important now when we face this challenge from Russia, which is interfering in the internal processes of other countries. It also becomes particularly incumbent on leading democracies such as ours to find ways to help promote freedom of expression, and the ability of journalists to do their jobs is particularly important to that.

We have a moral duty to stand with those who risk everything for democratic and press freedom, from Jimmy Lai in Hong Kong to Mzia Amaglobeli, a journalist who was recently arrested in Georgia—a good example of Russian overseas interference. The right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) was right to mention Alaa Abdel el-Fattah, who is imprisoned in Egypt. Their courage is a stark reminder that defending democratic values must never be selective or silent.

In Iran, the regime maintains a strict interpretation of Shi'a Islam and enforces its religious laws through harsh measures. Members of the Baha'i faith are persecuted on charges of apostasy or heresy. Christians, especially converts from Islam, face arrest as conversion is considered a criminal offence. The recent crackdown following the death of Mahsa Amini demonstrates the regime's continued brutality.

According to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, there are currently 1,342 individuals assessed as imprisoned for their religion or belief, with the highest numbers found in China, Russia and Iran. The Government must do more to work with our international partners to secure the protection of religious rights and robustly challenge states to ensure all people are safe to worship and express their political beliefs. This must include states upholding Article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights that guarantees the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

We call for specific actions: first, using the UK's Magnitsky sanctions, to stand up against human rights abuses; secondly, banning imports from areas with egregious

[James MacCleary]

abuses, such as Xinjiang; thirdly, enshrining in law a right for British nationals who have been politically detained abroad to access UK consular services; fourthly, developing a comprehensive strategy for promoting the decriminalization of homosexuality and advancing LGBT+ rights globally; and finally, stronger UK engagement with international bodies, such as the United Nations, the European Union and the Commonwealth to promote religious freedom worldwide. We call for a long-term, comprehensive global strategy to protect freedom of expression, political and religious rights, and to create a world where no one is imprisoned for peacefully expressing their beliefs.

The Liberal Democrats strongly oppose any form of authoritarian or totalitarian rule that seeks to imprison or silence individuals for their beliefs. We will continue to urge the Government to use the UK's influence and foreign policy to promote and protect these values.

Jerome Mayhew: Is there not a dichotomy there? The Liberal Democrats profess that they are against authoritarian rule, and yet for us to project power internationally, even if that is soft power, we risk involving ourselves in the sovereign decisions of independent countries. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that when we seek to impose our values on other cultures and countries we create a tension? Where does he think the right balance lies?

James MacCleary: Whole books on liberalism are written about this very topic, as the hon. Gentleman probably knows. The situation in the United States at the moment has brought this into sharp focus. For many years, we have heard countries around the world speaking about how America, at times with our support, has intervened in the internal affairs of their countries, and have asked how that is consistent when America has complained about them doing the same thing. Now that America is taking a different role, perhaps some people are reassessing what levels we should go to. I cannot answer the hon. Gentleman's question right now, although I am happy to have a separate discussion with him, if he would like, but hon. Members who are interested in foreign affairs have to think about the subject that he touches on and where the line lies. Famously, the Americans refer to the Mogadishu line as a line that they crossed in Somalia, where they felt they got too involved in the internal affairs of that country. Clearly, that is a difficult issue, but I thank him for raising it.

To conclude, our commitment is clear: to protect, defend and promote human rights for all around the world. We will not rest until every person can freely express their beliefs without fear of persecution.

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

2.13 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I begin by extending my thanks to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate. He is a tireless defender of human rights and his dedication to the cause of those who are persecuted for their beliefs, wherever they may be, is courageous, admirable and

much needed. I thank him for it. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for enabling the discussion to take place. It is a vital debate and it is only a shame that there are not more hon. Members present.

This country, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, has long been a sanctuary for the oppressed, and this Chamber has been a voice for the voiceless and a champion of liberty. From the days of William Wilberforce to the last Government's establishment of a special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, this House of Commons has stood up for the fundamental freedoms of speech, conscience and belief—long may that continue. I wish to speak for those who cannot speak freely themselves and who languish in prison cells, not for any crime but simply for having the courage to believe differently, to respectfully challenge authority or to follow their conscience in the face of tyranny.

We have had a short but meaningful debate, with some excellent contributions from colleagues on all sides of the House. The hon. Member for Strangford, who spoke passionately, as he always does, told us about the importance of defending those who profess their faith and uphold their convictions, and the importance of standing up for freedom. The love of freedom has always inspired me in politics. I grew up in the 1980s, when we had a Prime Minister who defended freedom around the world. Margaret Thatcher stood against totalitarianism and communism across the world, particularly in the Soviet Union. A belief in freedom and liberty drives the Conservative party. Love of country is part of that, and we have always been a nation that has stood up for the liberties and freedoms of the people of these islands.

I have great admiration for the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), who is no longer in her place, and I have worked closely with her on the issue of Armenia. We recall the Armenian genocide 110 years ago. She referred to her constituent, Annette Moskofian, who I also know very well and with whom I have worked on upholding the freedom of the people of Armenia. As the hon. Lady said, Armenian prisoners who are being kept in Azerbaijani jails also need to have their freedom. Armenia needs to live as an independent, free democracy without fear, and the people must be allowed to express their views freely. Last week, I attended a wreath laying at the Cenotaph with the hon. Lady and other hon. Members from across the House in support of our friends from Armenia, which is a Christian country that simply wants to be democratic and independent and not to be threatened by an aggressive neighbour.

No one in this House could ever compete with the passion, belief and deeply held views of my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne). I have admired him ever since I entered the House in 2001. He speaks with enormous passion and he understands that this is a Christian country. Our laws, traditions and customs are founded on those Christian traditions. If we discard them, we discard everything we have in this country. That does not mean that we do not respect other religions, but our Christian heritage is fundamental and leads Britain to be a champion of freedom, free speech and freedom of religion and democracy around the world, as we have been for far longer than most other countries. My right hon. Friend rightly reminded us of how our own Royal Navy eroded the slave trade—it is often forgotten that it was Britain

that led the way against the slave trade. I thank him for everything that he does to stand up for the rights of the oppressed, and particularly those religious minorities who are denied the right to worship and practise freely.

The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Lewes (James MacCleary), spoke extremely well and raised a lot of issues that are well known throughout the House. He spoke about the Uyghurs in Xinjiang and the importance of the China audit, which we are still waiting for; it is important that we get on with that. We have a moral duty to stand up for those who have lost their freedom; Britain has a proud record of that. That transcends party politics, and I am sure that it will do so in this House today. He also mentioned those of the Baha'i faith who are persecuted, which is another very important point.

There were superb interventions from my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew), who has now left his place. He spoke rightly about the balance between dealing with nations around the world: we want good relations and trade and co-operation, and we want to work with many countries economically, but equally we need to think about human rights. We need to balance those things. Equally, he spoke about imposing our values on other countries, which is always a balance. We cannot impose British values on every country of different traditions and religions, but nevertheless we should never be silent when we see an injustice. I know that certainly on the Opposition Benches—and, I am sure, on the Government Benches—as people who believe in freedom and democracy we all stand for standing up against injustice, wherever it may be in the world.

I will rightly focus on the people Members have mentioned who are wrongly detained in prisons for their religion or belief. What practical steps are His Majesty's Government taking to monitor, identify and support such individuals? The Minister has lots of time to answer all these questions. She will need to tell us very clearly what resources are being allocated by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to monitor prisoners of conscience globally. How is that information being used in the UK's broader human rights strategy? As a member of the Article 18 Alliance, will the Minister tell us whether the UK actively proposes names for international advocacy?

As we have already heard, the statistics are deeply alarming. According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, more than 1,300 individuals are currently imprisoned for their beliefs in just 28 countries. That includes 532 people in communist China, 327 people in Putin's Russia and 87 people in Iran. Other Members have mentioned other countries where similar issues need to be addressed, such as Vietnam and North Korea. The hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton mentioned Azerbaijan and Armenia, which I referred to earlier.

My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West quite rightly mentioned Venezuela. I met a delegation from Venezuela only last week, and I was an observer at a Venezuelan election some years ago. I have to say that it was not very democratic, and I do not think that much has changed since—in fact, it has got a lot worse. We should absolutely highlight that country as one in need of radical democratic change. My right hon. Friend also mentioned Egypt and Turkey.

There are many other countries that we could think of, but the point is that Britain must lead the way. We are the nation that always stands up for the rights and freedoms of peoples, and we must do so with vigour and without compromise. Will the Minister confirm whether the Government have raised specific cases with the Governments of those countries and others? If so, will she tell us which ones she has been speaking to in recent days?

I am aware that this debate is centred on matters of faith. However, I, like the hon. Member for Strangford, take the opportunity to raise the case of *Apple Daily* founder Jimmy Lai. We need to see him released, and an end to his politically motivated trial and the repeal of the draconian national security law in Hong Kong. It is one matter to speak in this place about individuals far afield who have little to no connection with these islands, but it is another matter when it involves a British national. What developments have there been on that issue so far? We talk a lot about it, but we see very little action. Given that the Government look as though they are becoming more economically aligned with China, which I think is a huge error, will Jimmy Lai's case be front and centre in our engagements with Beijing? Has the Minister specifically called for Jimmy Lai's release in dealings with her Chinese counterparts?

I commend the hon. Member for Strangford and all the members of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief for their laudable initiative and tireless efforts in launching a scheme that enables Members of this House to advocate for individual prisoners of conscience. That initiative represents a meaningful and compassionate step towards amplifying the voices of those who have been unjustly detained for exercising their fundamental rights. In the light of that important work, I must ask the Minister whether the FCDO is actively supporting that endeavour by assisting Members in establishing contact with relevant embassies in the United Kingdom as well as engaging with international legal and diplomatic mechanisms to strengthen advocacy on behalf of those individuals.

I am pleased that the Government heeded the call from the Opposition Benches on renewing the last Government's position in having a special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. However, can the Minister outline exactly what the special envoy is doing to advance the cause of individual prisoners of conscience? Has the envoy engaged directly with foreign Governments or institutions to press for their release? Do the Government intend to enshrine the post in law, for which my good friend the former Member for Congleton, Fiona Bruce, passionately campaigned when she served in this House until last year?

Britain has long used both aid and diplomacy to promote our values abroad. In that context, I ask the Minister whether the allocation of UK aid to recipient countries is ever made conditional on demonstrable progress in safeguarding freedom of religion or belief. Is consideration given specifically to the treatment of individuals imprisoned solely on account of their religious convictions? Is our financial assistance ever leveraged to encourage reform and accountability in such cases? Those in prison today for their beliefs, be they Christian, Ahmadiyya Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, any other religion or members of minority or non-religious communities, deserve more than just our concern: they deserve our advocacy, our voice and our unwavering defence.

[Andrew Rosindell]

Our foreign policy must reflect not only our national interests, but a projection of how we treat our own people. We must never shy away from calling out wickedness and unjust imprisonment or from defending the right to freedom of conscience. As the great John Stuart Mill, once a Member of this House, so wisely said:

“Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing.”

We look forward to this Government doing something.

2.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to respond to Members in what has been a fascinating debate. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing it, and I am very grateful for the contributions of other hon. Members. I will try to respond to all the points raised.

The Government stand in solidarity with those who are in prison solely because of their religious or other beliefs, and we call on Governments to ensure that the right to freedom of religion or belief is protected and promoted for all people everywhere. Societies that respect and uphold human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, are generally stronger, more stable and prosperous.

As many in the Chamber have articulated so eloquently, the scale of freedom of religion or belief abuses and violations globally is of grave concern. Article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights states that

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion”.

However, the reality faced by many—including the Baha’i community in Yemen and Iran, the Ahmadis in Pakistan, the church members in Nicaragua who have been harassed and arbitrarily detained, and non-Muslims caught up in Sudan’s civil war—is far removed from that principle. Persecution, harassment, discrimination and arbitrary detention are sadly part of daily life for many.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) and the spokesperson for His Majesty’s Opposition, the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), both mentioned the current issue of Armenians in detention following the recent conflict with Azerbaijan. Annette Moskofian has had a few mentions, because she is such an ardent believer in freedom of religion or belief, and is the constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton.

For those reasons, we are working hard to highlight and address the scale and severity of freedom of religion or belief abuses and violations, including by lobbying for the release of prisoners of conscience. I shall set out some examples. Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo, a pastor and leader of an independent church in Cuba, was imprisoned for participating in peaceful protests in that country. The Foreign Secretary wrote to him in December last year to express solidarity and called on the Cuban authorities to release him. We were delighted to hear that he was released in January. As the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) said, this must not be a counsel of despair; occasionally, we get good news in these cases.

Mubarak Bala has also been mentioned in this debate. A Nigerian atheist and president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, he was sentenced to 24 years for his belief. We regularly lobbied the Nigerian Government, including through letters to the Kano state governor and calls by Ministers for his release, and we were pleased to hear that he was also freed in January. Of course, there are many other examples, and I will try to set out what we are doing to support them.

The UK is determined to use its extensive diplomatic network to champion freedom of religion or belief on the international stage. As Members have mentioned, our human rights approach is being refreshed by the Minister for human rights in the other place, Lord Collins. He will come to Parliament in the usual way to set out that work when it is completed. I was very pleased to meet my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) earlier this week to discuss his role as the UK special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. To address the Bill proposing that we make that role statutory, while we recognise the benefits of the position, we do not believe that its value would be enhanced by making it statutory. As such, we will continue with the approach taken by the last Government under the excellent Fiona Bruce, maintaining the role as an office within the Foreign Office, but with a strong sense of challenge.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge) (Con): I welcome the tone in which this debate is being conducted. Given that the Minister will not make the special envoy’s role statutory, will she state very clearly that she will not make something else statutory—that she will not reintroduce a blasphemy law in the United Kingdom? She will recognise that the abolition of the blasphemy laws in the 1980s and 1990s meant that people could express whatever belief they happened to hold in a completely free way. That ended a level of oppression that had been possible, although not exercised for many years.

Will the Minister make absolutely clear that in no way will this Government support a blasphemy law, and that they will not allow police to introduce one through the back door by criminalising acts that would otherwise be covered by freedom of expression? Will she make absolutely clear that His Majesty’s Government stand for freedom of religion and non-belief, not just belief, and that that means the freedom to change one’s religion, to reject a previous religion, and to criticise any religion? Does she agree with that?

Catherine West: Of course I agree that freedom of religion or belief, or the right to have no belief at all, is critical and paramount. I know that organisations such as Index on Censorship, which the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) is part of, are very robust in that regard. It is crucial that we have the right to freedom of expression. On the finer points of the right hon. Gentleman’s question, if he would like to write to me, I will be very happy to write back using the particular language that he would prefer.

Nick Timothy: I was pleased by the Minister’s answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat). If we are talking about freedom of expression internationally, we have to be incredibly careful about freedom of expression in our own country. While Ministers often say that they oppose blasphemy

laws, we have seen section 4 of the Public Order Act 1986 used to prosecute people for acts of protest, including damaging the Koran. Is this not, in reality, the development of a back-door blasphemy law?

Catherine West: I reiterate my position that we uphold freedoms. On the specific point that the hon. Gentleman would like me to fall into a trap on, if he would write to me so that I can get exactly the right language, I would be pleased to write back.

I want to pursue my point about the importance of this not being a counsel of despair, as the right hon. Member for New Forest West said. A couple of Members have mentioned the country of Vietnam this afternoon, and while there are a number of concerns—including some that I raised with Vietnam's deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs on her recent visit to the UK, in the context of discussions on matters of bilateral interest—I was very pleased to read that there has been an 83% acceptance rate for the universal periodic review recommendations. I hope that Vietnam will be able to develop a national masterplan that specifies concrete, measurable and time-bound actions to follow up on those recommendations. We offer the expertise that we have within the Foreign Office, and stand ready to share our experience as we go on that journey together.

As I mentioned, the UK is determined to use its extensive diplomatic network, and the priorities of my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland will become clear as he meets with each of the Ministers to lay out his concerns. With his background at the Bible Society, I know that he will have a lot in common with the hon. Member for Strangford, and I am sure that they will bring more debates to this House in future, continuing to challenge Ministers on these important matters.

To give another example, last week my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland and the Minister for the middle east and north Africa, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), met the former prisoner of conscience Dr Nader al-Sakkaf, who was arbitrarily detained by the Houthis in 2016 for his association with the Office of the Public Affairs of the Baha'is of Yemen. They heard about his experience in Yemen, and discussed ways in which the Government could support him and other cases of this sort.

I also want to highlight the vital work of human rights defenders in addressing freedom of religion or belief abuses and violations, including arrests and arbitrary detention. As the Foreign Secretary said in his Human Rights Day speech in December last year,

“Human rights defenders around the world risk their liberty—and often their lives—for their belief in upholding fundamental human rights for all, through protesting, documenting human rights abuses, supporting political prisoners and standing up for democracy and justice.”

Without human rights defenders, we would not know the full scale of abuses and violations. I think of the tragic story this week of Viktoriia Roshchyna, a journalist whose body was returned without organs to her family following detention in Russia. I know that that will be of interest to the hon. Member for West Suffolk, given his association with the Index on Censorship—it is an absolutely tragic case. The UK is pleased to support important flexible funds such as Lifeline, which has provided almost 100 grants to civil society organisations under threat in over 30 countries since July 2024.

Turning to our bilateral engagements, the Government do not shy away from challenging countries that are not meeting their obligations. We continue to highlight our concerns, both publicly and in private. To give just one example, it is a central part of our work in Pakistan. My hon. Friend the Minister for the middle east and north Africa visited Pakistan in November last year, and was able to advocate for freedom of religion or belief with Government Ministers and business and religious leaders. High commission officials, including our political counsellor, regularly meet representatives from the Ahmadi, Christian, Hindu and Sikh communities.

We have followed the same approach with the Nigerian Government, including during Nigeria's universal periodic review last year. We are investing £38 million through our strengthening peace and resilience programme in Nigeria to help address the root causes of conflict in the middle belt and beyond. That, in turn, builds the capacity of the country's security forces to tackle violence against all civilian communities, including those of different religious backgrounds and beliefs.

On Syria, which is very much in the news this week, we have made it clear that the Government must ensure the protection of all civilians, set out a clear path to transitional justice and make progress towards an inclusive political transition. We will judge them by their actions. The shadow Minister asked how conditional our support was in trying to push for better human rights. I can guarantee that in the discussions about lifting sanctions in recent months following the ceasefire, we have discussed our vision for more freedoms for all the different groups in Syria.

Moving on to our multilateral work, at the UN we regularly participate in interactive dialogues with the special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief. In March, our special envoy was in Geneva to engage in a session on the intersection between freedom of religion or belief and torture. Last October, we participated in the interactive dialogue in New York on the link between freedom of religion and peace. We frequently raise FORB during the UN's universal periodic review process, such as in our statements on Bhutan, Nicaragua and Qatar last November. In the case of Nicaragua, we noted our increasing alarm at the deteriorating human rights situation. That includes the harassment and arbitrary detention of members of the Church and the closure of organisations affiliated with it. We continue to work closely with the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe as well. It provides a valuable platform for us to discuss and consider freedom of religion or belief and related issues.

Many Members have mentioned article 18, from which the Article 18 Alliance takes its name. It is a coalition of 43 countries formed to defend and advance religious freedom globally. The hon. Member for Strangford is involved in that alliance. The UK is an active member and works closely to combat discrimination and persecution based on religion or belief. That includes highlighting specific cases of prisoners of conscience and co-sponsoring statements and campaigning for their release, such as the chair's statement on Tibetan religious prisoners of conscience and Gedhun Choekyi Nyima. Linked to those important campaigns, we have worked closely with the Article 18 Alliance on statements that condemn FORB violations and promote mutual respect between different religions and belief groups. For example, in

[Catherine West]

November last year, we joined an important statement that condemned anti-Muslim hatred and urged countries to uphold the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Before I conclude, there are a couple of points that I have not covered. The hon. Member for Lewes (James MacCleary) talked about China, and I reassure him that we raise our concerns at the highest level. A number of people have mentioned one of our most high-profile prisoners of conscience, Jimmy Lai. Just this week, I met Sebastien Lai, and I discuss Jimmy's progress and how he is getting on regularly with Sebastien's constituency MP, who sits on our Benches. Our staff in Hong Kong attend the court regularly to watch every single element of that procedure. We are working hard to continue to keep that at the highest level, whether that is Prime Minister to President, Foreign Secretary to Foreign Minister, or me at ministerial level when I can.

The hon. Member also asked about the China audit, which I can confirm we will be bringing forward soon. Within that process, I have met Rahima Mahmut on the Uyghur situation. The hon. Gentleman will be well aware that there is ongoing concern about that, and I reassure him and others watching this debate that we have definitely looked at that subject and how it impacts on our day-to-day lives and business practices here in the UK.

Briefly on Iran, we know that Christians in Iran are persecuted. That includes the ethnic Armenian and Assyrian Christians who face political, economic and social barriers. They are entitled to freedoms as a formally protected minority, but they are often unable to practise their religion and are banned from preaching to other Iranians. Persian Christians and converts from Islam are considered apostates and face severe harassment, detention and lengthy prison sentences. Christians often face propaganda charges as a result of their religious activity. The UK is on the core group for the recurring Iran resolution led by Canada, which always includes language relating to freedom of religious belief and Christians. We are looking forward to the next UN 3C resolution, which will be tabled in November 2025.

We have had a very good debate, and I thank the House for its patience. To conclude, this Government remain committed to addressing the issues of prisoners of conscience and freedom of religion or belief. No one should suffer for their beliefs, and we will continue to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief at every opportunity.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Jim Shannon to wind up.

2.44 pm

Jim Shannon: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their participation in this debate on prisoners of conscience and the importance of faith and freedom of religion or belief. The persecution of religious minorities and human rights are married; if people are being hurt by persecution over religion, their human rights are being hurt, and vice versa. All Members are right to say that. Today this House has been a voice for the voiceless and offered hope for those with no hope.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), referred to never being silent when we see injustice, and he is right. We will not be silent in this House. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) said that today will not be a counsel of despair. He and I, and many others in this Chamber, share a religious belief. He referred to prayer—pray every day; pray earnestly; pray fervently; pray often. He is right to say that, because that is what we should be doing.

I remind the House of the story of William Wilberforce, who often spoke in this House against slavery. There may be but a few of us here today, but remember: it only takes a few to make a change. William Wilberforce never saw the complete abolition of slavery in his time, but his actions made a difference. I thank all those who made a difference today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered prisoners of conscience.

Hadlow College

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Anna Turley.)

2.46 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge) (Con): I am sorry to see the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) running off. I was very much looking forward to his intervention a little later, but maybe he will be back. Who knows? Lucky me.

Hadlow College is Kent's only land-based rural college. It is unique in our county for the offer that it provides. Its huge range of courses are designed to provide the skills needed to maintain Kent's place as the garden of England. Having been campaigning for fantastic Conservative councillors earlier today in the beautiful sunshine, I can assure the House that it remains that wonderful garden.

The college is a regional powerhouse and an important part of the local Tonbridge community. Speak to any of our key rural businesses, and they will say how the skills offered at Hadlow College help maintain our agricultural capacity in Kent. For those reasons, we should have always been celebrating what Hadlow College does for the local area, but I must be honest: there was a period when we could not. In 2019, Hadlow College became the first further education institution in the country to enter educational administration. During this debate, I will explore how the process affects Hadlow and the community today and ask the Minister to consider how it could be improved.

Before I do that, I pay tribute to all staff and students who were at the college and all the linked institutions during this challenging time. They made sure courses kept running and that most were unaffected. I will name just a few of those people: Graham Morley, the first interim principal after educational administration in 2019; Lindsay Pamphilon; Jim Mawby at the Tonbridge site; and now David Gleed and Chris Lydon from North Kent College. That is not to forget Paul Boxall and his team at Hadlow rural community school, to whom I will refer later. The reality is that they had a much harder job because of the process the college went through in 2019.

In May 2019, Hadlow College became the first further education facility in the country to enter educational administration after an Education and Skills Funding Agency investigation. This followed updates to the statutory college insolvency regime in January 2019 that affected further education and sixth-form colleges. It meant that Hadlow College kept its doors open. But it was not just Hadlow College that needed to be rescued; also included were Hadlow rural community school, West Kent College in Tonbridge, Betteshanger colliery in Dover, Ashford College, Princess Christian's Farm in Hildenborough, animal management sites in Canterbury and Mottingham, and a further site in Greenwich. The question is simple: how did so many further education institutions end up insolvent?

The expansion happened quickly in the years preceding 2019. It was about not just the acquisition of further sites, but the subsequent investment. Let us take the example of Betteshanger colliery; after Hadlow College's interest started, it spent £1.2 million on changing plans for a visitor centre, and then lost £4 million on the

collapsed sale of a business park. It very quickly became clear that the college had been reckless with its finances. Its expansion was getting further away from its core purpose: to provide land-based education in west Kent. Following the ESFA investigation, I wrote to the then Minister of State for Apprenticeships and Skills at the Department for Education, Anne Milton, on 10 May 2019. On Betteshanger colliery, the letter said:

"I would be concerned if further investment is made here in light of the financial situation should courses be cut, with students left unable to gain their qualifications."

Put simply, money was either being used for peripheral projects that did not exist, or being transferred out of students' education.

At this point, I wish to touch on the concept of the Hadlow Group. I have a copy of a letter I received on 1 October 2018 from the so-called Hadlow Group, which informed me of a proposal to merge West Kent and Ashford College with Hadlow College. In the interests of time, I shall not go into the background of the merger, which starts with the collapse of K College nearly 15 years ago; I merely want to point out that the Hadlow Group was seeking to merge colleges at the time. As the ESFA, the Further Education Commissioner, the administrators and the Department have rightly recognised, the Hadlow Group had no legal structure—it was essentially a marketing term to provide credibility to the ever-expanding portfolio of sites—which gives us an indication as to where things started to go wrong.

In the years leading up to 2019, I met representatives of the college many times, and often I was asked to help secure significant amounts of money for them. In December 2016, I was informed of two immediate funding issues: the repayment of £888,000 from the 2014-15 financial year, which arose from the K College acquisition, and the £929,935 that was needed at West Kent and Ashford Colleges for 2016-17. I asked the Department for this funding on the basis that it was used to support further education provision in west Kent, but was it? We now know that Hadlow College applied for £20 million from the ESFA's transactions unit, but the application failed. The ESFA demanded that its funding be returned, and Hadlow College consequently asked for what was essentially a Government bail-out.

I include all that history so that the Minister and the House can understand the complexity of the situation and to make it clear what was happening. Money was being requested on a huge scale, supposedly for further education provision, but that is not where it was going. As subsequent investigations have found, there was financial mismanagement on a scale never seen before, which led to Hadlow College entering educational administration. There must be some accountability for the people who made those decisions, and it is therefore disappointing to many that those responsible for the expenditure—primarily the principal and the finance director at the time—have not had their investigations conducted in the public domain.

We learned in November 2023 that Paul Hannan, the then principal, will be fined £250,000 if he ever works in education again. We also know from the administrators' reports that a deal was made with the deputy principal, Mark Lumsdon-Taylor, whereby he agreed to pay a four-figure sum as part of a confidentiality agreement. I find this part of the process extremely unsatisfactory. Tens of millions of pounds of public money has been

[Tom Tugendhat]

poured into the educational administration process because of the reckless actions of the two senior leaders of Hadlow College at the time. Given the scale and profile of this issue, I do not think that a confidentiality agreement is appropriate, and I urge the Department to bring forward amendments to future legislation that increase the level of transparency and accountability in such matters.

This view is widely held in the community because, sadly, the offer at Hadlow College has deteriorated since the educational administration process. The Hadlow College farm shop is no more and the Broadview tearooms have closed. Its landholding has decreased. All of this had enabled Hadlow College to be a sustainable provider prior to the reckless expansion plans pursued in the last decade. That is all now gone because of the need to pay back for failed business ventures.

Put simply, what has happened here is a gamble with students' education to expand beyond the core purpose of Hadlow College. I want to build on this point further, and I would appreciate answers from the Minister about how we can strengthen the educational administration process to future-proof education land. Why do I focus on land? Because that is what Hadlow College is fundamentally about. It is a land-based college. It needs land to train the next generation of rural entrepreneurs. The more land it has, the more it can contribute to the rural economy. The same applies to Hadlow rural community school.

In 2022, a number of parcels of land around Hadlow were marketed for sale by Knight Frank on behalf of the administrators, and the proceeds were used to pay back creditors. I understand that rationale from a financial perspective, but this is not an administration process. It is called an "educational administration", and education provision has successfully continued throughout this turmoil.

There is broad agreement from all those now responsible for delivering further education at Hadlow, including North Kent College and Hadlow rural community school, that the sale of parcels of land has impacted the student offer. This is deeply regrettable. I would therefore like to ask the Minister how we may be able to adapt the educational administration process to ensure that land sales are not the default, especially for land-based educational establishments with this specialism.

From the perspective of North Kent College, having just taken over Hadlow College, the speed of this process meant it could not accurately make arguments to safeguard some land earmarked for sale. This has meant repurposing its provision on a smaller footprint. This has a big impact on the village. Indeed, having to repurpose means a much-desired footpath and cycle way between Tonbridge and Hadlow is extremely unlikely to be delivered.

The impact on Hadlow rural community school is even more severe. I am afraid I am deeply concerned about the approach the Department is currently taking towards its governance. The school has done extremely well to survive the process. It was designed for a land-based specialism, which the educational administration process rightly safeguarded. The separation of the college and the school was inevitable, but not necessarily detrimental to either. However, the loss of land in Hadlow affects them both.

I refer the Minister to my letter of 10 April 2025 to the Secretary of State. The Department is now articulating—based on a letter to the school from the Department, dated 3 April—that the plots of land at Court Lane, which could be used for educational provision, are sold. Frankly, it was this letter that motivated me to apply for this debate. The reasons given for that suggestion are interesting. It is claimed in this letter that Ministers have determined that

"capital investment options do not offer good value for money".

This is the same Department that has rightly invested tens of millions of pounds in securing the future of education in Hadlow, both for the school and the college.

The education provision needs to be appropriate in a competitive market. Tonbridge has some of the highest-performing secondary schools and further education facilities in the country, and many people move to our community for our schools. Hadlow rural community school is an important part of this network, and one that has a clear specialism. The Department needs to support this first and foremost.

In addition, I was extremely disappointed to see a passing reference, at the end of the same letter, to the school

"engaging with North Kent College"

in a "long-term solution". May I please remind the Minister that the long-term solution was found when separation occurred? I encourage the Minister to speak to officials who can remind her of the considerable correspondence we had back in 2023 to secure the appropriate lease for the school to access the college's land.

Returning to the nub of the issue, Hadlow rural community school must thrive and succeed. To do so, it must have land available to retain its land-based specialism. It can do this under the current governance model, not as part of North Kent College's delivery of services at Hadlow College. This works best for both parties, otherwise we run the risk of repeating all the governance failures that contributed to educational administration in the first place. The history I referred to earlier—of murky governance processes, expansion without clear justification and, frankly, some pretty outrageous scrutiny of public finances by the two individuals I named—must be avoided.

This is where I want to end. Education administration is an extremely difficult process. It is expensive and, since the incorporations legislation in 1992, I doubt whether there have been many other transactions where two interconnecting colleges were broken up, with one split into two parts and then transferred to three receiving colleges. Today, many parts of the complex further education web at Hadlow, and in Kent more broadly, are thriving. I pay huge tribute to those in further education colleges who give so many opportunities to so many. As I said at the start, staff, management and students must take huge credit and huge pride for what they achieved during those difficult days. It is now the responsibility of the Department to safeguard that under the current governance model. I will continue to be happy to work very closely with the Minister and her officials to achieve that, so we do not allow any historical actions of the kind I have listed to happen again.

3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat) on securing this important

debate. I, too, wish to pay tribute to all the staff and students at the colleges and the school mentioned in the debate, North Kent College and Hadlow rural community school. In fact, I wish to extend that to all colleges and schools across Kent. I heard very clearly the points he made and I will attempt to address them during the course of my response.

Further education colleges are a vital part of the education system. It is important that we continue to support them and provide all the necessary tools to assist with ensuring that they have good financial sustainability. That includes the ability to respond to financial distress and, in its worst case, insolvency. Land-based provision is an important part of the further education system, with strong links to the Government's mission to kick-start economic growth, support Britain's ecology and make it a clean energy superpower.

Hadlow College, part of the North Kent College group, is the only land-based college in Kent. It has its own beef herd, sheep farm, horticultural production, a large animal management centre, fisheries lakes, a machinery and land-based technology facility, and equine centres. Its curriculum includes courses in agriculture, agricultural engineering, animal management, equine management, fisheries, floristry and horticulture, as well as some non-land-based courses. It has an important place within the Kent skills system.

Hadlow College has one main campus, in Hadlow. Prior to being placed into education administration, it was federated with another college, West Kent and Ashford College, a general further education college with campuses in Ashford and Tonbridge. Historically, in 2019, the colleges faced a series of financial challenges, resulting in a request to the Department for Education for exceptional financial support. At this time, the colleges continued to face significant creditor pressure, which was a key factor in the decision to place Hadlow College into education administration. Combined, the colleges owed creditors approximately £100 million prior to education administrators being appointed. Hadlow College was placed into education administration in May 2019, followed by West Kent and Ashford College in August 2019.

Following the appointment of education administrators, they, in conjunction with the Department, stabilised the financial position of the college while a solution was sought to ensure that learners were protected without the college needing to remain in education administration. The education administrators also hired an interim principal to run the colleges, with advice from a stakeholder education advisory board during this period. What followed was an intense period of options review, led by the Further Education Commissioner, to determine the best future outcomes for the colleges' provision. This included inviting interested parties to make proposals to take on the provision. It should be noted that Ofsted visited both colleges during the process and found that they were making reasonable progress with regard to educational performance. This resulted in the recommendation that North Kent College should acquire the Hadlow College's provision and its respective facilities. The transaction was supported with funding from the Department and was completed in August 2020. At this point, I would also like to say that the protection of learners was achieved, which I will go on to explain further.

Alongside the Hadlow College education administration, the education administrators for West Kent and Ashford College also ran an options review in conjunction with the Further Education Commissioner and invited interested parties to take on the college's provision. This resulted in the recommendation that East Kent College should acquire the college's provision and its respective facilities at the Ashford site. The transaction was supported with funding from the Department and was completed in March 2020. Combined with the transaction at Hadlow College, together with other smaller, similar sites between both colleges, more than 5,000 learners were protected through the education administration process.

An investigation into any mismanagement at the college was undertaken by the education administrators and then joint liquidators. This is a statutory lead investigation that applies not only to education administration, but to other insolvency processes. The outcomes of those investigations are detailed in the joint liquidators' progress reports—publicly available at Companies House—but, in summary, they reached settlement agreements with the individuals involved.

The Department welcomed the conclusion of the joint liquidators' investigations into the conduct of certain relevant individuals at Hadlow College and West Kent and Ashford College. The Department takes the protection of public funds extremely seriously, and we will continue to support robust action where there are concerns about the safeguarding of taxpayers' money.

As the right hon. Gentleman points out, there have been implications of the education administration of the college for the co-location of Hadlow rural community school. The school was originally established by Hadlow College with a land-based specialism. The two organisations had governance links, and the school accessed the college's extensive land-based facility to deliver its offer. During the process of the college's education administration, separate governance arrangements for the school were established and the Department worked with the school to ensure that these arrangements were robust. The price for Hadlow rural community school to access the college's facilities rose to the extent that it was no longer sustainable within the school's budget, and the school has requested departmental support to help it develop its own land-based facilities.

I appreciate that the school has undertaken extensive work on proposals to the Department over a number of years to inform the officials' assessment, and I pay tribute to headteacher Paul Boxall, his team and the Hadlow rural community school trust board for all the work they have done and for the passion they have shown in seeking to ensure the very best for their pupils. However, this is a complex case and it is critical that any support the Department may provide offers value for taxpayers' money.

It is, of course, important that the school has clarity so that it can move forward with certainty and thrive. To be clear, Ministers value the school's land-based specialism and appreciate the challenges this situation has caused for the school, and we remain open to considering ways to support the school to ensure it can continue to offer a high-quality and broad land-based curriculum.

The recent decision the right hon. Gentleman refers related not only to the Court Lane land, but to potentially significant capital investment to develop facilities on

[Janet Daby]

that land, particularly with high-quality specialist facilities at the neighbouring college. In the context of constrained public finances, Ministers decided that it did not offer good value for money.

Given those facilities at Hadlow College, our view is that, rather than replicating such specialist and expensive facilities next door, it is worth exploring whether an agreement can be reached between the college and the school on shared use of the college's facilities. We understand that there will be complexities to that, and that it will be important to the school for any solution to offer security for the long term. Should the two organisations agree to negotiate, we have offered support from officials to try to help broker that, and, at the moment, this seems very likely.

To be clear, we understand the school's desire for independence, and the Department has no intention of forcing the school to change its governance arrangements. We remain open to considering alternative proposals from the school. Indeed, the school has recently suggested a new option, which officials have agreed to consider.

The liquidations of both Hadlow College and West Kent and Ashford College remain open while the liquidators realise the remaining surplus non-educational assets. Again, the details of those assets are in the joint liquidators' progress reports, available at Companies House, but, in summary, they relate to surplus plots of land in Hadlow.

The liquidators' strategy to realise the surplus land involves planning applications for its inclusion in Tonbridge and Malling borough council's local plan, which would, if successful, enhance its value.

The Department has priority security on all these remaining land assets, and any realisations directly offset the costs of the education administration process and are effectively a return to the Department and the taxpayer. Those assets, which were not surplus and were required by either North Kent College or East Kent College, were transferred to those respective colleges as part of the transactions to take on the learners and provision of Hadlow College and West Kent and Ashford College and achieve the objectives of the education administration to protect those learners.

I know that the right hon. Member has requested a meeting, and I understand that that is in progress. I can assure him that we will continue to work with the joint liquidators to ensure the best possible outcome for taxpayers. We will also continue to work with North Kent College to ensure that the land-based and general further education provision in Hadlow continues to succeed for the benefit of its learners and for the right hon. Member's constituency.

Question put and agreed to.

3.12 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statement

Thursday 1 May 2025

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Multiple Sclerosis Awareness Week

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): This Government want to ensure that every person with multiple sclerosis receives high-quality healthcare.

Today, during MS Awareness Week (28 April to 4 May), I would like to update the House on the work under way to support service improvement and ensure better care for patients with MS in England.

The Government have set out an ambitious programme of reform for the NHS. The health mission has set the clear goals of achieving an NHS that is there when people need it and a fairer Britain where everyone lives well for longer. Our plan for change will rebuild the health service and deliver better care for everyone.

NHS England's Getting It Right First Time neurology programme supports improvements to MS care by identifying and addressing variations in care, sharing best practices, and promoting efficiency through a clinically-led approach, ultimately leading to better patient outcomes and reduced costs.

NHS England's neuroscience transformation programme is also improving MS care by focusing on faster diagnoses, better co-ordinated care, and improved access to specialist services.

While the transformation programme provides the overarching framework for improving neurology care, products such as the RightCare progressive neurological conditions toolkit offer practical guidance and support to improve MS care by promoting a joined-up, high-quality approach, ensuring that patients have access to specialist care and resources, and facilitating better co-ordination of care across different services.

NHS England is also updating its specialised neurology service specification, which includes MS. Service specifications define the standards of care expected from organisations funded by NHS England to provide specialised care.

The Government have also recently established the Neuro Forum, a UK-wide Government-led forum focusing on services and support for people affected by neurological conditions. It is the first of its kind and brings together the Department, NHS England, devolved Governments and health services, and neurological alliances across the UK to address gaps in treatment and care, and to drive improvements in neurological health across the four UK nations.

In March, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence published technology appraisal guidance on cladribine (Mavenclad), expanding its recommended use to include people with relapsing-remitting MS who have active disease; previously only recommended for highly active RRMS, NICE has now expanded its availability to a much wider group of patients, with the NHS becoming the first healthcare system in Europe to roll it out widely to patients with active disease. It is estimated that about 2,000 patients could be offered the treatment over the first three years.

NICE'S approval of ublituximab (Briumvi) for active relapsing-remitting MS, in December 2024, has further expanded the range of drugs available to people in the NHS, ensuring that more people can find the treatment that is best for them.

Research is advancing our understanding of MS. The Department delivers research into neurological conditions via the National Institute for Health and Care Research. In 2023-24, the NIHR spent £72.9 million on research into neurological conditions across research projects, programmes and infrastructure.

Through the NHS 10-year health plan, we will aim to improve care for people with long-term conditions such as MS.

The plan will set out bold ambitions to provide more care in the community, make greater use of technology and build a more preventive health service. This will include how the NHS will provide high-quality care for people living with long-term conditions such as MS.

[HCWS614]

Written Corrections

Thursday 1 May 2025

Other Correction

CLIVE JONES

Prime Minister: Engagements

The following extract is from Prime Minister's questions on 30 April 2025.

Clive Jones: 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.

[*Official Report*, 30 April 2025; Vol. 766, c. 317.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones):

Clive Jones: 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 **2021**, so I am asking this Government to keep their promise.

Ministerial Correction

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

The following extract is from Prime Minister's questions on 30 April 2025.

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.

[*Official Report*, 30 April 2025; Vol. 766, c. 325.]

Written correction submitted by the Prime Minister, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer):

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 **30,000** homes in London, as part of the 1.5 million homes that we will build across the country, which are desperately needed.

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Thursday 1 May 2025

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**not later than
Thursday 8 May 2025**

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