

**Tuesday
6 May 2025**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 6 May 2025

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

ROYAL ALBERT HALL BILL [LORDS]

Second Reading opposed and deferred until Tuesday 13 May (Standing Order No. 20).

NEW MEMBER

The following Member took and subscribed the Oath required by law:

Sarah Joanne Pochin, for Runcorn and Helsby.

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Maternity Improvement Strategy

1. **Jack Rankin** (Windsor) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of implementing a national maternity improvement strategy. [903925]

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): We expect all women to be shown the utmost care and respect when receiving maternity and neonatal care. This year's planning guidance requires integrated care boards and providers to deliver the key actions in this final year of NHS England's three-year delivery plan. It is clear from listening to the harrowing stories of bereaved and harmed families, however, that we must do more. The Secretary of State is urgently considering the significant action needed to ensure that all women and babies receive the care they deserve.

Jack Rankin: Last year's birth trauma inquiry report exposed that maternity services in this country are woefully underfunded, and now the Health Secretary intends to cut the budget for maternity improvement from £95 million to just £2 million, equating to less than £4 per child born in this country each year. What kind of change is that? What message will that send to mothers across the country? Does the Secretary of State plan to implement any of the recommendations from the birth trauma inquiry report, many of which were committed to by the previous Government?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Gentleman is not correct: maternity funding is not ringfenced at the same level—I think that is what he is referring to. It has, however, absolutely been committed to as far as ICB allocations are concerned. Local leaders will decide how best to allocate that money. We will continue to work with Donna Ockenden and the families who have been affected

by previous incidents and ensure that the recommendations of her report and the maternity review are fully implemented.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): As colleagues will be aware, there is a consistent failure in maternity units to listen to women and put their experiences—and quite often their pain during childbirth—at the heart of driving improvements. What assurances can the Minister give us that women's experiences and voices will be at the heart of any maternity improvement strategy that the Government focus on?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight that point, which has been found in all the reviews that have been undertaken. It is completely unacceptable. That is why the Secretary of State has continued to meet families and hear their experiences to ensure that we learn from them, continue to support the implementation of those recommendations and, crucially, ensure that women's voices are taken forward as part of our 10-year plan.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): I fear that many will have found the Minister's answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin) disappointing. He highlighted that the previous Government committed to the headline recommendation of the cross-party birth trauma inquiry led by the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) and the former Member for Stafford, Theo Clarke, who has recently written about her experiences in a book, and in the *Daily Mail* called for a national maternity improvement strategy. No equivalent commitment has been made by this Government. Let us try again: will the Minister commit without any equivocation to implementing the inquiry's recommendation to produce a national maternity improvement strategy?

Karin Smyth: To be clear for the shadow Secretary of State, the Secretary of State is continuing to look at all those recommendations and consider how best to respond.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): Too many families in Shropshire have suffered the agonising loss of a baby following the scandal at Shrewsbury and Telford hospital NHS trust. The Care Quality Commission rates 65% of trusts as inadequate or requiring improvement for maternity safety, and the taxpayer forked out a staggering £1.15 billion in compensation for maternity failings last year. With the £100 million put aside to deal with unsafe staffing no longer ringfenced, can the Minister reassure us that those safe staffing levels will remain on our maternity wards?

Karin Smyth: I know the Liberal Democrat spokesperson follows this issue very closely in her own local community. As she knows, we are committed to ensuring that the recommendations of the reviews are fully implemented as part of that three-year plan, but I gently say to her that the Liberal Democrat party has consistently opposed the extra £26 billion that this Government raised to

support the wider health service. Without that extra funding and the decisions that the Chancellor has made, we would not be able to make the progress that we are now starting to see.

Shifting Care into the Community

2. **Jessica Toale** (Bournemouth West) (Lab): What steps he is taking to shift care from hospitals into the community. [903926]

14. **Jo Platt** (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to shift care from hospitals into the community. [903938]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): Despite my best efforts, may I welcome the hon. Member for Runcorn and Helsby (Sarah Pochin) to her place? Being a Member of Parliament is a privilege, and I know how special it is to sit on these Benches having been sent here by constituents. Regardless of our political differences, I wish her well personally.

As part of our 10-year plan for health, we want to deliver a real shift in the centre of gravity in the NHS, so that people get more care closer to home and, indeed, in their home, too. The NHS is as much a neighbourhood health service as a national health service. We have already made progress in shifting care to the community: providing more than £889 million in funding for GPs; agreeing the GP contract for the first time since the pandemic; and recruiting more than 1,500 GPs on to the frontline. Our 10-year plan will set out how we will continue to transform the NHS into a neighbourhood health service.

Jessica Toale: I am deeply concerned about the quality of healthcare for people experiencing homelessness in my constituency of Bournemouth West. HealthBus, a local charity, is doing great work in getting out into the community to treat people where they are and to prevent them from having to go into hospital, but it is not getting the funding that it needs and has discovered serious discrepancies in the way that the local integrated care board commissions services, particularly in relation to health inequalities. Can the Secretary of State tell me how this Government are prioritising health outcomes for people experiencing homelessness, and will he meet me and HealthBus to discuss how we can support its important work?

Wes Streeting: The founding mission of the NHS was to be there for people whenever they fall ill, so that they never have to worry about the bill. Unfortunately, thanks to the disaster and the failures of 14 years of Conservative Government, too many people in our country today experience the fear that Nye Bevan sought to eradicate. As my hon. Friend would expect, tackling health inequalities for homeless people and other vulnerable groups is central to the values of this Labour Government. Those values will be reflected in our 10-year plan for health. I would be delighted to hear from her further on what we can do to improve services in her area.

Jo Platt: I thank the Secretary of State for his announcement this morning regarding GP services. One way that pressure is eased in our GP services is through charities such as Compassion in Action, which provides

non-clinical, whole-person care in my constituency. It receives GP referrals from across Leigh and aligns with the Government's aim to shift care from hospitals to communities. Will the Minister join me in thanking the staff and the founder, Pam Gilligan, and agree to come for a tour of the facilities and to see at first hand the impact that they have?

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly join my hon. Friend in thanking Pam and everyone at Compassion in Action for the work that they do. At the heart of our approach to health is a recognition that Government action is essential for improving health outcomes in the country, and that Government acting alone will not be sufficient. That is why working with the voluntary sector, employers, trade unions, community groups and all of us as individual citizens is vital for tackling health inequalities and improving care in our country. I would be delighted to ensure that one of the team pays a visit to the charity as soon as possible.

Mr Speaker: Stuart Anderson, welcome back.

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): Community hospitals can reduce pressure on major hospitals, especially in rural communities such as mine. Will the Secretary of State lay out his plans to support community hospitals in South Shropshire?

Wes Streeting: At the heart of this Government's approach is investment in, and reform of, the NHS to ensure that we deliver better outcomes for patients. That means the biggest devolution of power in the history of the NHS with more decisions taken closer to patients and to their communities, and more power in the hands of patients, too. Community hospitals have a vital role to play, and thanks to this Government's decision to deliver £26 billion more into our NHS—opposed by the Conservative party—we will no doubt be able to make further and faster progress.

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): In my constituency there is an ageing population in need of local healthcare services. Will the Secretary of State meet his Scottish counterpart to discuss the need for increased access to community healthcare, and specifically the need for a new health and care centre within my constituency?

Wes Streeting: The hon. Member will be delighted to know that only last week I met with my counterparts in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to talk about how we can work together to improve health and care throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. She will know that health is devolved, but thanks to the decisions taken by this Labour Government, the Scottish Government have just been delivered the biggest financial settlement since devolution began. That might mean that they finally make some progress on their waiting lists in Scotland, where one in six Scots are on a waiting list and the SNP is on its fifth NHS reform plan in four years.

GPs: Time with Patients

3. **Alex Ballinger** (Halesowen) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support GPs to spend more time with patients. [903927]

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that we have recruited over 1,500 additional GPs since October through an investment of £82 million, helping to fix the front door to the NHS. Today we have announced £100 million to unlock new capacity and more appointments in GP surgeries. We have also launched a red tape challenge and scrapped unnecessary targets in our new GP contract to cut down on bureaucracy and free up time to spend with patients.

Alex Ballinger: My constituents in Halesowen have written to me time and again complaining that they are calling their GP surgeries at 8 am, as instructed, but are still unable to get a same-day appointment. Can the Minister set out how the £100 million investment in GP surgeries, consulting rooms and other facilities will finally put an end to the frustrating 8 am scramble?

Stephen Kinnock: I absolutely share the frustrations of my hon. Friend and his constituents. The investment made today was in response to GPs telling us that they needed more space; the investment will lead to more capacity and better access and outcomes for his constituents. Today's announcement was only possible thanks to the decisions made in the October Budget, which were opposed by every party opposite. The choice is clear: investment in our NHS with Labour, or cuts with the Tories and Reform.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): My constituent Dr Toby Nelson, an NHS consultant dermatologist, has started a business that seeks to address the heavy demand on primary care for skin health screening. His business Map My Mole sends an image capture kit to patients to attach to their smartphones. The patients then send a high-resolution image remotely to be reviewed by a specialist consultant, bypassing the need for a GP appointment and freeing up time and resources for both doctor and patient. It has already resulted in a significant drop in skin cancer referrals in pilot GP surgeries. Will the Minister agree to meet Dr Nelson and me to discuss this revolutionary proposal?

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Lady raises what sounds like an extremely interesting scheme. She will know that we have a strong commitment in our 10-year plan to shift from hospital to community, and indeed from analogue to digital. The digital aspects of that scheme sound very interesting, so I would be more than happy to take further representations from her.

Eye Care: 10-year Health Plan

4. **Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to improve eye healthcare through the 10-year health plan. [903928]

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): My hon. Friend is an outstanding campaigner on this issue, as I am sure everybody across the House is aware. She will know that the NHS England accelerator pilots have shown how improved IT connectivity and a single point of access can speed up eye care referrals and allow more patients to be managed in the community. That is a great example of the shift we want to make from analogue to digital. We are developing the 10-year

health plan with input from the public, our partners and health staff, and that of course includes the eye care sector.

Marsha De Cordova: I thank the Minister for his response, and I welcome all the work that he and the Secretary of State are doing in rebuilding our NHS. However, we know that there is a capacity crisis within eye healthcare. NHS ophthalmology continues to be the busiest and largest outpatient service. That is essentially what is leading to many people not getting seen soon enough, which is resulting in many of them losing their sight unnecessarily. What we need is a joined-up healthcare plan. Will the Minister ensure that eye healthcare will be part of the Government's wider 10-year health plan?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is right that early intervention is crucial, and the interface between the high street and secondary care is a vital part of that. That means having a joined-up eye health strategy. The 10-year plan will have that joined-up strategy at its heart. She will be pleased to know that, since July, ophthalmology waiting lists have dropped by 24,000, so change has begun. There is still a long way to go to dig us out of the mess left by the Conservative party, but it is thanks to the decisions that the Government have made, opposed by Opposition parties, that we are beginning to see that change gaining traction.

Sir James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Another part of the 10-year health plan is the use of digital technology. Auto-contouring with artificial intelligence reduces waiting times and frees up capacity for radiotherapists, which is why £15.5 million was allocated to it under the Conservative Government; money that has been cut under the Minister's Government. Why?

Stephen Kinnock: I think that the right hon. Gentleman is referring to the single point of access digital technology, which is game changing in terms of improving the interface between high street and secondary care. It is probably worth reminding him that the question is about eye care. We are absolutely committed to single point of access technology, which we believe can be game-changing technology and is a vital part of our shift from analogue to digital.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): The president of the Royal College of Ophthalmologists has stated that the widespread outsourcing of NHS cataract surgery to private, for-profit providers risks the integrity of hospital eye surgery departments meaning that there will be few services to treat patients with preventable blindness. How can we reassure the public that such services will be maintained?

Stephen Kinnock: Although the independent sector clearly has an important role to play in tackling waiting lists and backlogs, we will not tolerate any overpriced or sub-par care, and we will not tolerate any distortion of patient choice. The recently published partnership agreement between NHS England and the Independent Healthcare Provider Network commits to ending incentives that can lead to that, and to supporting equal access and genuine choice for all patients. We are working together to deliver on that.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): NHS Sussex ICB is one of only five in England not to commission a minor eye conditions service—known as MECS—in community optometry settings. That means that patients in Chichester with urgent or minor eye issues have to either join the 8 am queue for a GP appointment or go to their hospital rather than being seen quickly on the high street. Given that 99.9% of MECS patients elsewhere in England are seen within 24 hours, will the Minister set out what action he is taking to ensure that those services are commissioned consistently across all ICBs within the 10-year health plan?

Stephen Kinnock: ICBs are responsible for the commissioning of these services, which are clearly extremely important, and the early intervention side of eye care is particularly important. I would be more than happy to look into that issue with the hon. Lady's ICB if she wrote to me and made further representations.

English Devolution: Integrated Care Boards

5. Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Whether he has had discussions with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on the interaction between mayors and integrated care boards, in the context of the English devolution White Paper. [903929]

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): Our mission-driven approach to this issue means that we are working with all Departments to deliver an NHS fit for the future. We expect integrated care boards to work closely with their mayors to maximise public health and contribute to the Government's health and growth missions.

Blake Stephenson: Funding and delivery of a GP surgery for Wixams in my constituency continues to fall between the cracks of developers, local councils and the local ICB. Does the Minister agree that to break those deadlocks and build the infrastructure that our communities require, new mayors should have the power to direct ICBs, making locally elected politicians responsible rather than unelected quangos?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Member tempts me slightly on local accountability, on which he has been a strong campaigner. As he knows from meeting me, I agree that it is important that such local bodies respond properly so that where there are expansions of housing, which we want to see, they are supported by local infrastructure. I am happy to come back to him with any further detail.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): Norfolk and Waveney integrated care board is consulting once again on closing Norwich's walk-in centre. It asked the same question two years ago and the city and Norfolk said, "No, we want to save our walk-in centre." Does the Minister agree on the importance of walk-in centres, and in the context of devolution, how will we ensure that ICBs heed what residents say?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend is right to campaign on behalf of her constituents to make sure that more services are delivered in communities. We want to see services brought out of hospital and into local communities. It is up to the ICB to decide how those are commissioned,

but we will certainly make sure that, as part of our commitments under our 10-year plan, we see more of those sorts of services working together in neighbourhoods.

Health and Social Care Reform

6. Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): What plans he has to reform NHS health and social care services. [903930]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): People deserve the very best health and care. Our plan for change is already bringing waiting lists down. Our 10-year plan for health will set out how we improve access and make the three shifts that I described earlier, so that the NHS is fit for the future. At the same time, we are rebuilding adult social care now and for the future. Baroness Casey's independent commission has launched, and it will set out through its work how we will create a national care service. All that is made possible thanks to the investment decisions taken by the Chancellor in her Budget. That investment was opposed by the Conservative party, which shows that only Labour can be trusted to invest in and modernise our NHS.

Natasha Irons: Last week, the Centre for Young Lives published a report on the state of mental health support for children and young people across England. It outlines that despite an ongoing crisis in mental health among young people,

"There remains a 55% treatment gap"

between adult and children's mental health, and that "fewer than 10%...of ICBs have a dedicated strategy"

for supporting children's mental health. Will the Secretary of State consider strengthening statutory guidance for ICBs to ensure they assess the local need of children and young people, publish treatment gap data on an ongoing basis, and create joined-up, community-based mental health support for our young people?

Wes Streeting: Young people's mental health is a priority for this Government. That is why we set out in our manifesto our commitment to making sure that mental health support is available in every primary and secondary school in the country. We have walk-in mental health services in every community, and we invest in the mental health workforce, so that we can cut waiting times. I am also working closely with the Secretary of State for Education to make sure that our education and health services work together, so that children get the very best start in life, and so that we look after mind, body, soul, aspiration and futures.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): The Chancellor increased the cost of employing people in social care by raising national insurance contributions for social care employers, and then exempted NHS employers from those increased costs. When will this Government properly support social care and relieve the sector from pressures caused by the Chancellor under this Government?

Wes Streeting: Thanks to the decisions taken by this Chancellor, we are putting £26 billion more into health and social care. Thanks to the decisions taken by this Chancellor, the spending power of local authorities has risen. Thanks to the decisions taken by this Chancellor, we have delivered the biggest expansion of carer's allowance since the 1970s. Thanks to the decisions taken by this

Chancellor, we have significantly increased the disabled facilities grant, not just last year but this year. That is the investment delivered by a Labour Government, and opposed by the Conservatives and Reform, and it shows that only Labour can be trusted with our NHS.

Mr Speaker: You will have another chance in a minute! I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): This Government have been in power for 10 months. Two months ago, Labour postponed the cross-party talks on social care. When will they be rescheduled?

Wes Streeting: As I have announced to the House, Baroness Casey's independent commission is up and running. She is making contact with parties across the House as part of the work of her commission, and it is for her to decide the basis on which she engages with parties. I look forward to working with parties at the conclusion of the process.

Dr Evans: I thank the Secretary of State for that change, making the process no longer cross-party. The Government have said that the changes will not be implemented fully until 2036. Only this week, the Health and Social Care Committee released its new report on social care and the huge cost of inaction. The report called for new actions that could be taken now, such as the publishing of annual assessments of unmet care needs for adults, and annual estimates of how much delayed discharges cost the NHS. Will the Secretary of State commit to those two today?

Wes Streeting: I take the Select Committee seriously, and I will look carefully at its report, but the shadow Minister has some brass neck. He mentions this Government having been in office for 10 months, but the Conservatives had more than 10 years in office, and we are picking up the pieces from the mess they left behind. That is why they were kicked out of government, and why they are being kicked out of opposition. Looking at this lot, I think: this must be how the islanders felt, looking at the dodo.

Emergency Dentistry: Access

7. **Manuela Perteghella** (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of access to emergency dentistry. [903931]

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): We are already rolling out our manifesto commitment of 700,000 extra urgent dental appointments per year. These appointments are available across the country for those experiencing painful dental issues such as infections, abscesses or cracked or broken teeth. We are committed to reforming the dental contract and making NHS dentistry fit for the future.

Manuela Perteghella: The dental contract imposed in 2006 is widely recognised as a key factor driving dentists out of the NHS. In my constituency of Stratford-on-Avon, there are no NHS dentists currently taking on new patients, and existing NHS patients are being actively pressured to go private or seek care out of county. Will the Minister commit to urgent reform of NHS dentistry, and set out a timeline for negotiations, so that I can reassure my constituents?

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Member is right to say that the dental contract is fundamentally flawed and needs reform. I met representatives of the British Dental Association on 8 April, and had a productive discussion with them about dental contract reform. Officials from the Department of Health and Social Care are working hard with the BDA and other stakeholders to develop a dental contract that works for patients, for dental professionals and for the public purse. I will of course keep her and the House updated. I know this issue is of huge importance to the country, and to every Member of this House.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is a year today since I was sworn into this House, and every single week, someone has raised with me the issue of getting access to an NHS dentist in Blackpool. Nowhere is taking on adults, and nowhere is looking after pregnant women. This has to change, so can the Minister outline to my constituents when they will be able to get access to an NHS dentist under this Labour Government?

Stephen Kinnock: There is no perfect payment system. We have to look at the issue around units of dental activity, and at options around capitation and sessional payments, and come to a conclusion about what works and about how to ensure that everything that we commit to NHS dentistry is spent on NHS dentistry. We are in a mad situation in which, although demand for NHS dentistry is going through the roof, we have an underspend every year on the contract. We have to fix that. It will take some time to work that out with the British Dental Association and other key stakeholders. What is tragic about this situation is that the Conservatives had 14 years to fix the situation and left it in a terrible mess.

Perinatal Mental Health

8. **Laura Kyrke-Smith** (Aylesbury) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve perinatal mental health provision. [903932]

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): I commend my hon. Friend for her work on such an important topic; I know it is very personal to her. Specialist perinatal and maternity mental health services are available across England, providing vital support to parents before, during and after pregnancy, including increased access to evidence-based psychological therapies. We are training thousands more midwives to better support women throughout pregnancy, with mother and baby units and community services providing postnatal support.

Laura Kyrke-Smith: Tomorrow is World Maternal Mental Health Day, recognising the particular challenges that some mums face from pregnancy to birth, and after birth. I commend the Secretary of State and his team for their rapid work to get the NHS delivering better for patients again. As they develop the 10-year plan for the NHS, what measures will be taken to ensure that all women facing perinatal mental health challenges can access the right psychological support, and that there is no postcode lottery?

Karin Smyth: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in recognising the importance of supporting women's health throughout pregnancy and into parenthood on Maternal Mental Health Day. We are committed to improving the

support available, and it will form an important part of our 10-year plan. We are investing £126 million in family hubs and Start for Life services, to support parents from pregnancy to their child's early childhood, and we will continue to work with her on this.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Laura Kyrke-Smith) for her question and the Minister for her answer. I am delighted to be forming the all-party parliamentary group for fatherhood. Will the Minister outline the steps that she will take to improve perinatal mental health for fathers?

Karin Smyth: I congratulate the hon. Member on taking forward that work. The Minister responsible will be happy to continue to work with him in any way possible to support that work on this important aspect of parenthood.

Preventive Healthcare: New Technology

9. **Katie White** (Leeds North West) (Lab): What steps he is taking to use new technology to help improve preventive healthcare. [903933]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): We are already using technology to improve preventive healthcare and to transform the NHS. We have invested £11 million in artificial intelligence to trial breast cancer screening mammogram interpretation. We are piloting the NHS health check online to tackle cardiovascular disease, and our NHS Better Health digital products, including the award-winning Couch to 5K app, were used by millions of people last year to tackle preventable conditions. More will be included in the 10-year health plan.

Katie White: Leeds is leading the way in health tech, with Leeds teaching hospitals, the city council, NHS Digital and firms like EMIS, headquartered in Rawdon in my constituency, driving real innovation. How will the Secretary of State and his team ensure that Leeds is at the heart of the NHS 10-year plan, so that we can shift to prevention and spread the benefits to every corner of the UK?

Ashley Dalton: I commend the work that my hon. Friend refers to. The new HealthTech innovation hub—a flagship project of the West Yorkshire investment zone—brings together West Yorkshire combined authority, organisations like the HealthTech Leeds partnership, academics, clinicians, policymakers and more than 250 health tech firms headquartered in the region. They are already driving forward health innovation together. As we have said before, we must learn about the best of the NHS and take it to the rest of the NHS. The 10-year plan will shift us to a model in which the NHS focuses on prevention, with more services delivered in local communities through new technologies.

Alex Brewer (North East Hampshire) (LD): A piece of technology that already exists that can prevent hydrocephalus is the humble tape measure. The Secretary of State said that he would ask the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence to conduct a review of the frequency with which infants' heads should be measured

to allow us to detect hydrocephalus early. The charity Harry's HAT—Hydrocephalus Awareness Trust—based in my constituency says that this review is not necessary, and that the evidence is already there. Will the Minister meet me and the charity to discuss this further, so that more infants' lives can be saved?

Mr Speaker: In fairness, the Secretary of State did meet them.

Ashley Dalton: And he has just sold me on what a wonderful charity it is. I would be more than happy to make sure that the relevant Minister meets the hon. Member to discuss the matter.

NHS England: Abolition

10. **Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): What progress he has made on the abolition of NHS England. [903934]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): As the Prime Minister and I announced, NHS England will be brought back into the Department to put an end to the duplication, waste and inefficiency resulting from two organisations doing the same job. That is the final nail in the coffin of the disastrous 2012 reorganisation, which led to the longest waiting times, lowest patient satisfaction and most expensive NHS reorganisation in history. Since the announcement, we have set up a joint board, assessed resources and responsibilities across existing organisations, developed proposals about the role, functions and structure of the new centre, and started detailed operational and legislative planning.

Gregory Stafford: The Secretary of State claims to support change, yet delays to NHS reorganisation, including to the promised abolition of NHS England, suggest otherwise. Is it not the truth, as he outlined in his *Guardian* article, that he is bogging the system down in a slow, top-heavy restructuring, while resorting to tax rises, instead of delivering the decentralised, locally delivered, value-for-money healthcare that our constituents deserve?

Wes Streeting: A lot of words and not a lot of sense. We are reforming the NHS and, as a result of these changes, redirecting hundreds of millions of pounds to the frontline. What was the Conservative party's response to the abolition? The shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), said it could be a "great thing", but it

"could be a total disaster".

Will they let us know when they have made their mind up?

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): The Lansley reforms were implemented top down by the Conservatives. The idea that the NHS could ever be truly independent, when it is there to serve us—the taxpayer and the general public! Does the Secretary of State agree that it is absolutely the right decision to move funding away from the centre to the frontline to prioritise patients in the NHS's work?

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend has huge experience in this area, and she is absolutely right. What we saw under the Conservatives was bloated bureaucracy—layer upon layer of checkers, when we need more doers. That is why frontline staff, patients and provider leaders all welcome the changes that we are making, so that we can invest more into our frontline.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): The *Health Service Journal* reports that officials have acknowledged that the first draft of a high-level plan for merging NHS England and DHSC has been delayed. When we ask any written question about the merger, the standard answer seems to be:

“Ministers and senior Department officials will work with the new transformation team at the top of NHS England, led by Sir Jim Mackey, to determine the structure and requirements needed to support the creation of a new centre for health and care.”

Even when we ask a question specifically about the size of the transformation team, the answer is virtually identical. The Government either wilfully decide not to answer, or simply do not know. As with so many things, the Government go for the headline-grabbing announcement and talk the talk on reform, without having done the actual work to deliver it. My question to the Secretary of State is simple: when will that first high-level plan for the merger, with a full assessment of costs and savings, be published?

Wes Streeting: Honestly, the right hon. Member had his chance—he was the Minister who took forward the last reform Act, under the Conservative Government. He failed in that task, and now he turns up without a shred of remorse or a shred of humility, attacking this Government for cleaning up the mess that the Conservatives left behind. They are not a party of government—they are not even a party of opposition any more. They are a total irrelevance.

Neighbourhood Health Centres

11. **Josh MacAlister** (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to implement neighbourhood health centres. [903935]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): We are committed to fixing the front door of the NHS, including by delivering the primary care infrastructure required to enable a neighbourhood health service. We have already taken steps to improve primary care infrastructure, including by providing £100 million of capital funding to upgrade GP buildings. We will set out how we will move to a neighbourhood health service in our upcoming 10-year plan, following the spending review.

Josh MacAlister: I thank the Minister for her answer. Workington suffers from some really poor health outcomes and has an incredibly fragmented health system. I have worked with local leaders in my constituency to pull together a plan for a new neighbourhood health centre called the Workington health zone, based around multidisciplinary teams, clear goals, less bureaucracy and much greater access for patients. Does the Minister agree that this is exactly the kind of reform that we need to enable through the forthcoming 10-year plan?

Ashley Dalton: I do agree, and I would be delighted to work with my hon. Friend on the Government's commitment to delivering a neighbourhood health service that reinforces integrated working for the NHS, local government, social care and wider partners as the norm.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Knutsford desperately needs a modern medical centre. The local GPs and the community are united in feeling that current provision is no longer fit for purpose. With the population growing, it cannot meet everybody's needs. In the light of the Government's announcement of £102 million to modernise GP surgeries, so that it is easier for them to see more patients, will the Minister meet me to discuss a new modern medical centre for Knutsford?

Ashley Dalton: I thank the right hon. Member for recognising the significant investment announced today in GP services and buildings, and I would be delighted to ensure that the relevant Minister meets her.

Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Integrated Care Board: Waiting Times

12. **Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions he has had with Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent integrated care board on patient waiting times. [903936]

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): Driving down waiting times is one of this Government's top priorities, and my colleagues at NHS England continue to keep in regular contact with ICBs on improving waiting times and delivering the ambitions set out in our elective reform plan. Since July, we have cut waiting lists by more than 219,000 across England, and by 6,000 for University Hospitals of North Midlands, and have delivered 3 million more appointments.

Gareth Snell: I thank the Minister for her answer, and recognise the Herculean effort the Department is making to reduce waiting times, particularly in Stoke-on-Trent, but one cancer patient who is having treatment at the Royal Stoke hospital in my constituency has shared her story with me. From the initial operation, it took six weeks for her to be told that she may have cancerous cells in her lymph node. There was a delay in getting the CT scan, and after the scan, she was told that it would be 10 weeks before she could meet an oncologist to discuss the results. Will the Minister say a bit more about how the Department, while reducing waiting times to access services, will make sure that treatment is given in a timely fashion once someone has a treatment plan?

Karin Smyth: I am sorry for the experience that my hon. Friend's constituent has had, and he highlights a really important aspect of the patient journey through the system. I want him and the House to be assured that we are looking at the entire patient journey, both into hospital and between hospitals. We are determined to improve patient experience and quality of care, and to get back the patient satisfaction that was squandered by the last Government.

Hospital Backlogs

13. **Adam Jogee** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): What steps he is taking to tackle hospital backlogs. [903937]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): Reducing hospital backlogs is a key priority in this Government's plan for change, as the 18-week standard for elective care has not been met for almost a decade. Our elective reform plan sets out how we will return to that standard by the end of this Parliament, through a combination of investment and reform. Since July, the waiting list has reduced by over 219,000 and we have delivered an extra 3 million appointments, exceeding our manifesto pledge and doing it earlier than planned.

Adam Jogee: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his answer and for the progress made, but there is still more to do. My constituent in Newcastle-under-Lyme has recently been recovering from brain surgery at the Royal Stoke university hospital. However, she has faced multiple setbacks due to failures in the duty of care, including scalding injuries and a severely mishandled admission process. She is now receiving the correct care, but she had to wait many months to be admitted to the correct ward, and has been given limited time for rehabilitative treatment. Does the Secretary of State agree that to tackle backlogs, our hospitals must have the resources they need to provide the right care the first time round, so that patients are given the time and support to fully and effectively recover?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question, and horrified to hear about his constituent's experience. This Government will never brush problems under the carpet or pretend that things are better than they are, and I know that for all the progress we have made in the past 10 months, there is still so much more to do. When we publish our 10-year plan for health, we must ensure that quality and safety are at the heart of every patient interaction. My hon. Friend is right about the need for investment. That is why we are investing £26 billion in the NHS and social care, and why it is so disappointing that the Opposition parties voted against it.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): On a recent visit to the breast unit of the Royal United hospital in Bath, specialists told me about a red flag system that could help to speed up care. If someone has a red flag symptom, such as a lump or a bleeding nipple, the triage team can book them straight into the breast clinic, rather than waiting to see a GP. Does the Secretary of State support such an approach?

Wes Streeting: I thank the hon. Member for her extremely constructive contribution. That is exactly why at the heart of our plans for reform and modernisation, we are placing such an emphasis on digital and technological transformation. We have such rich data about the experiences of our patients, but we are not using it effectively enough. If we use the information more effectively and efficiently, we can spot and identify risk much more proactively, and ensure that people get timely access to urgent care and treatment when they need it.

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for the work that he and his team have done to reduce NHS waiting times month on month for the last six months. However, the backlog that grew under the last Conservative Government is still impacting on my constituents. I have listened to

countless constituents who have told me about the upsetting impact of long waiting times for an ADHD diagnosis for children. That is having a detrimental knock-on impact on access to support, including child and adolescent mental health services and shared care agreements, and there is a lack of support for adopted children. I welcome the news that waiting lists have gone down, but will the Secretary of State set out how his work will be targeted at bringing down waiting lists for ADHD diagnoses in my constituency, to ensure consistency in diagnosis rates across trusts?

Wes Streeting: I am so grateful to my hon. Friend for her question, and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education, who is leading cross-Government work in that area. We have a taskforce that is specifically looking at the issues that my hon. Friend raises, and together we are looking to ensure that our education and health services are better joined up to meet the needs of young people. I am working with my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) and drawing on his experience to look at how we can improve the health and care of care-experienced young people and young adults. I hope we will have lots of progress to report on those issues.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): One way to reduce the backlogs is to reduce or put an end to health tourism in this country, whereby people come to this country, get their treatment, and then nip back to where they come from. Does the Secretary of State think it is a good idea that people entering this country should provide evidence of health insurance or be refused entry?

Wes Streeting: When any of us travel abroad, we expect to take out travel insurance and pay for our healthcare needs overseas, and that is the standard that we expect for visitors to our country. We have lots more to do to improve on that front. I deplore the comments made by the hon. Gentleman's party leader, who said that he does not support a taxpayer-funded NHS for the British people. He might want that debate, and the Leader of the so-called Opposition says that she wants that debate, but as far as Labour is concerned, we are clear about where we stand. Under Labour, the NHS will always be a national health service, publicly funded and free at the point of use.

NHS Reliance on Private Healthcare Providers

15. **Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP):** What steps he is taking to reduce the reliance of the NHS on private healthcare providers. [903939]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): This Government are taking a hard-headed approach to cutting waiting times. We are investing an extra £26 billion in our NHS, and where the independent sector has spare capacity, we will pay to get NHS patients treated faster and free at the point of use. So far, our approach to investment and reform has cut waiting lists by more than 200,000. Perhaps the hon. Member will tell us how it is going in Scotland.

Seamus Logan: The Secretary of State claimed this morning on BBC Radio 4's "Today" programme—a most excellent programme—that Labour is the only party that can be trusted with the national health service. Can he confirm that no aspect of the NHS whatsoever, whether it is ownership of the estate, the provision of specialist services or any other form of privatisation, will be included in the much-promised trade deal between the UK and the United States? No more excuses, Secretary of State: just give a direct answer to a direct question.

Wes Streeting: I have said it before, and I will say it again: the NHS will be privatised over my dead body. This party founded the NHS as a publicly funded public service, free at the point of use. We use the independent sector to cut waiting lists, and guess what? The SNP-led Government in Scotland do the same thing. We have made it clear that the NHS is not up for sale in any trade deal. That is clear and unequivocal. The hon. Gentleman can sling mud as much as he likes, but he cannot run from the SNP's abysmal record on the NHS over 18 long, poor years.

Topical Questions

T1. [903950] **Yuan Yang** (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): GPs are at the front door to our NHS. Today, I can announce that we are supporting more than 1,000 surgeries across the country to modernise their buildings, backed by more than £102 million—the biggest public investment in GP facilities for five years. Following years of neglect, this vital funding will create additional space to see more patients, boost productivity, improve patient care and enable 8 million more family doctor appointments each year.

Yuan Yang: I very much welcome today's announcement on refurbishing 1,000 GP surgeries across the country, because I have made it my priority to meet with as many GPs as possible in my constituency. Our local GPs have told me that our health centres need more physical space in order to accommodate growing local needs and facilitate the expansion of healthcare into the community. Is the Secretary of State willing to meet me and my local GPs to discuss how we can better improve the physical space needed for care to be brought closer to people's homes?

Wes Streeting: I would be delighted to do so. Since we came into government, we have made this announcement today, put £889 million into general practice and agreed a contract with GPs, including reform for patient access and services. We are fixing the front door to the NHS, but of course that will take time. We recruited 1,500 more GPs by the end of March, but day by day, week by week, month by month and year by year, people should see improvements in their GP services thanks to Labour.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Taking medicines on time is important, especially for those with conditions such as diabetes and epilepsy. Dr Acheson, an A&E consultant who has time-critical

medicines for his own Parkinson's disease, understands that well. He has been running a quality improvement programme to ensure that time-critical medicines are given on time in A&E. Will the Secretary of State lend that project his support and commit to reviewing how time-critical medicines are delivered on wards?

Wes Streeting: I thank the shadow Minister for her constructive question. I would be delighted to hear more about that initiative. She is absolutely right about timely access to medicines, and through a combination of service reform and the modernisation of technology, we can assist clinicians and patients to help them to manage their medication and ensure that people get timely access to medicines.

Dr Johnson: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, and I would be delighted to meet him to discuss it further.

Unfortunately, when Labour negotiates, Britain loses. The Government capitulated to union demands with nothing in return. It is therefore of no surprise to anyone that within months, they are back in dispute with resident doctors and the British Medical Association has announced a ballot for strike action. What will the Secretary of State do to protect patients and taxpayers?

Wes Streeting: I will tell the hon. Lady what we are not going to do: we are not going to see £1.7 billion wasted on strikes by resident doctors or 1.5 million cancelled operations and appointments, which is exactly what happened on the Conservatives' watch. Within three weeks, we ended the strike by resident doctors and we have cut waiting lists by 200,000 as a result. As I have said to resident doctors, their pay offer will be fair and neither staff nor patients want to go back to the bad old days of strikes under the Tories. They had an unwilling and inalcitrant Government under the Conservatives, who were unwilling to work with resident doctors, but we want to work with them to deliver better care for patients.

T3. [903952] **Mr Richard Quigley** (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): I pay tribute to my 17-year-old constituent, Arlo Lambie, who tragically died on 13 April following the diagnosis of a grade 4 brain tumour. I knew Arlo—he was a fun and bright lad who will be sadly missed. While Arlo's parents, Ellie and Alex, wish to put on record their thanks for the "incredible and compassionate care" Arlo received at St Mary's hospital on the Isle of Wight, they want to know what steps the Secretary of State is taking to improve NHS access to breakthrough treatments to ensure that the commercial interests of pharmaceutical companies do not take precedence, so that children with brain cancer, like Arlo, are given the best possible chance to survive for longer.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): I add my heartfelt condolences to Arlo's family. In September, we launched a new series of funding opportunities designed to improve brain cancer research for both adults and children. We are committed to furthering our investment and support for high-quality brain tumour research, ensuring that funding is used in the most meaningful and impactful way. Hon. Members will note that there is a debate on

Thursday on brain tumours, and I will be attending the all-party parliamentary group on brain tumours next week.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): In his statement to the House just after Christmas, the Secretary of State acknowledged that cross-party consensus is essential to delivering meaningful social care reform. The Liberal Democrats support him in that endeavour, but we still do not have a date for those cross-party meetings, so will he give us one now?

Wes Streeting: Dates for meetings with the commission are now a matter for the independent commission.

T6. [903955] **Josh MacAlister** (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): West Cumbria, like many parts of the UK, is a dental desert. In some communities, urgent dental access centres have proved to be a real success at building up dental services, so will the Minister support my campaign to introduce an urgent dental access centre in west Cumbria?

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): The Government have launched a scheme to provide 700,000 urgent dental appointments. There are 57,500 allocated to my hon. Friend's integrated care board. He will know that ICBs are responsible for commissioning primary care services based on the needs of the population, but I know that he is a strong campaigner for his constituents. I understand that his dialogue with his ICB on this matter has been positive and constructive, and I am sure that he will continue to fly the flag.

T2. [903951] **Sir Jeremy Hunt** (Godalming and Ash) (Con): The chief executive of the Royal College of Midwives has said that the axing of the maternity safety ringfenced pot would be a "wrecking ball" to the efforts being made to improve maternity safety. Just a single or a small group of babies being spared lifelong disability would pay for the cost of that ringfenced pot many times over. I know that the Secretary of State cares about this matter deeply, so will he reconsider?

Wes Streeting: The funding is still there, but as many people have urged me, including the right hon. Gentleman, we are taking the decision to give more freedom and flexibility to independent care boards, systems and providers to determine how they can best spend NHS resources on services to improve patient care, safety and outcomes. Everyone will know that maternity safety is understandably a priority for this Government. We expect the NHS to deliver on maternity safety standards and will hold it to account on that.

T7. [903956] **Olivia Bailey** (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): Residents in Theale and across my constituency tell me time and again how hard it is to get a GP appointment, which causes distress and sometimes dangerous delays. Will the Secretary of State outline how his programme of reform and investment will end the 8 am scramble for good and deliver more GP appointments for my constituents?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend will know that we have hired 1,500 more GPs, which will help with access. We have also renegotiated the contract, so there will be online booking systems in every practice in the country, and we have changed the contract to incentivise continuity of care in order to bring back the family doctor. There is a suite of reforms coupled with investment, which I hope will deliver for my hon. Friend's constituents.

T4. [903953] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): One of the great frustrations for medical professionals and patients alike is when patients have appointments but do not turn up. What action will the Secretary of State take to ensure that the system penalises people who miss appointments, so that patients can get the treatment they need when they need it?

Wes Streeting: We are absolutely convinced that better use of digital tools will enable us to reduce the number of missed appointments significantly and factor in the likelihood of no-shows, so that we can reduce waste and eliminate inefficiency. I understand the case for penalties that the hon. Gentleman is making, but that is not a route we want to go down until we have made those improvements and judged how effective they have been.

T9. [903958] **Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): Far too many promises made by the last Government—promises that care would be moved out of hospitals and into the community—turned out to be hollow. From speaking to residents in Dartford, I know that hospital and community services have struggled to keep pace with new housing developments in the constituency. I am pleased to say that later this year in Dartford we will be seeing an expansion of our state-of-the-art community diagnostic centre, taking care closer to where people live. Does the Secretary of State agree that this is the start of Labour getting on with finally delivering that big shift, and will he visit Dartford with me—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think Ministers have got the message. If they have not by this stage, I would be surprised. Who is answering?

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): My hon. Friend is absolutely right that this is exactly the sort of thing that is being rolled out across the country, and that we are committed to delivering care closer to where his residents live.

T5. [903954] **Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Residents in Mid Bedfordshire are concerned about the standards of maintenance at our two local hospitals. What action are the Government taking to support our hospitals in Luton and Bedford to catch up on maintenance backlogs?

Wes Streeting: Thanks to the investment that the Chancellor committed to, we are investing in the NHS estate, which is in a sorry state. I am afraid that that is an investment that the hon. Gentleman did not vote for, and his constituents will be fuming when they find out who was responsible.

Mr Bayo Alaba (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): I recently heard from Chelsea, a constituent of mine, who raised concerns about her grandmother Anna's care. After a delayed discharge, she was released with

the wrong equipment, which sadly resulted in her falling out of bed and sustaining a further injury. Ensuring that patients are discharged in a safe and timely manner is key to continuing the Department's significant progress in cutting waiting lists for treatment, so what steps is the Secretary of State taking to promote integrated working between services to support discharge into the community for patients?

Wes Streeting: I am extremely sorry to hear about that particular case. It is really important that we support and facilitate better discharge, which is why we are reforming the better care fund and looking to better integrate health and social care services through our 10-year plan. I would be delighted to hear further from my hon. Friend about what we can do to improve in his area.

T8. [903957] **Tessa Munt** (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I have a constituent who has broken and rotting teeth. His GP referred him to the local dental hospital, but he has been refused treatment because the hospital said that the surgeon would take a referral only from a dentist, which my constituent and many others in Somerset just do not have. What does the Minister suggest my constituent should do to stop the pain?

Stephen Kinnock: As the hon. Lady knows, we now have a commitment to providing 700,000 more urgent dental appointments. Those who do not have an NHS dentist can call 111 and will be prioritised. We are very clear that every integrated care board has a target within those 700,000 appointments, and if they are not hitting that target, we will want to know why.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield Hallam) (Lab): As someone with ADHD, it is disappointing to hear from many of my constituents about difficulties in accessing diagnosis, medication and other therapeutic inputs for ADHD, and the impact on their lives and livelihoods as a result. Whether for children or adults, waits of two, five or seven years are becoming the norm. What steps are the Government taking to make sure that individuals can exercise their right to choose?

Stephen Kinnock: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for improving support for ADHD and recognise the valuable perspective that she brings through her lived experience. This Government inherited a broken NHS, with too many people facing long waits for an assessment. NHS England's ADHD taskforce is looking at how support for people with ADHD can be improved. I look forward to reading its report, and I recently had a very productive meeting with the director of that taskforce.

T10. [903959] **Mr Peter Bedford** (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): The Government have committed to providing 700,000 extra emergency dental appointments, but in the midlands the units of dental activity rate is just 83% and there is no additional funding for the integrated care boards. Will the Minister therefore give assurance to my constituents that he will fully deliver on that promise?

Stephen Kinnock: I give the hon. Member that assurance. We have been clear that every ICB has a target, and that was transparently published, and we will be monitoring it. I am holding regular meetings with officials to check

that every single ICB is on track to hit those targets. If ICBs are not on track to hit those targets, we will want to know why.

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): Earlier this year, I met the Cockerthorpe and Maryport primary care network, which told me about the increasing challenge of supporting my constituents with their mental health. Has the Secretary of State considered relaxing the additional roles reimbursement scheme funding rules to allow mental health nurses to be employed wholly by a PCN, and not need to be under the employment of a local mental health trust? That flexibility could help GP practices to intervene earlier and reduce referrals to secondary care quickly.

Stephen Kinnock: We have, in fact, relaxed the rules on ARRS so that a mental health worker can be employed by the PCN. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that that is an important part of stepping from hospital to community, but there is more we can do on that. We continue to do whatever we can to ensure that mental health and GP surgeries are actively integrating.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): *Getting It Right First Time* is a clinician-led programme that leads on improvement and transformation. Can the Secretary of State give reassurance that in any restructuring of NHS England, that programme will not just be continued, but expanded and still available to the devolved Administrations?

Karin Smyth: I am absolutely willing to give the hon. Member that commitment, and I know he worked on this programme in his previous role in Northern Ireland. It is delivering results, and we want to see results. We want to take the best to the rest of the NHS, and we absolutely want to work together across the United Kingdom to make sure that all our residents benefit from the programme.

Gregor Poynton (Livingston) (Lab): Lung cancer causes more deaths in Scotland than anywhere else in the UK. In England, early detection programmes are under way, and by 2028 every patient is likely to gain access to screening. In Scotland, doctors tell me that that programme is a distant dream. Does my hon. Friend agree that the SNP is failing Scottish patients and Scottish healthcare professionals? This UK Government are getting on with the task of fighting this deadly cancer.

Ashley Dalton: I agree with my hon. Friend. We are making great strides in developing our cancer plans. We will be launching a national cancer plan later this year, and the targeted lung cancer screening programme has been particularly effective. The SNP has had a record settlement for Holyrood, and we expect the Scottish Government to deliver. If they cannot, I am sure that Anas Sarwar and Jackie Baillie would be willing to take over.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Yesterday's report from the Health and Social Care Committee is explicit that we cannot build an NHS fit for the future without effectively reforming social care. Back in January, the Secretary of State promised cross-party talks as well as Baroness Casey's commission. He cannot outsource

political leadership to Baroness Casey. Political will is the sticking point with the reform of social care. Will he show that leadership and bring the parties together to find the solutions to unblock this crisis?

Wes Streeting: Since we came into government, we have already taken action on social care with the investment we have put in—the biggest expansion of carer's allowance and the funding for home adaptations through the disabled facilities grant. Now that the commission is up and running, there will be cross-party engagement, but it is an independent commission and for Baroness Casey to decide how to engage.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): Last week, this Labour Government announced the freezing of prescription charges, putting pounds back in the pockets of people in Derby. I have visited pharmacies, including the Littleover pharmacy, which provide essential care and support for their communities. The Conservatives underfunded pharmacies and more than 750 closed across England between 2021 and 2024. What is the Minister doing to support community pharmacies so that we do not lose these vital local services?

Stephen Kinnock: After years of neglect, this Government have agreed with the sector a record uplift to £3.1 billion for 2025-26 for this vitally important front door to our NHS. We are also supporting pharmacies to operate more efficiently, including enabling hub and spoke dispensing between all pharmacies later this year. I am pleased to say that the legislation for that has been laid. What a contrast that is with the previous 14 years. I am also pleased to see that the National Pharmacy Association has withdrawn its view on taking collective action. We are moving in the right direction, but there is still a lot more to do.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I welcome today's announcement of new money for GPs' surgeries, but GPs in my constituency tell me that they cannot get capital out of the integrated care board and that the Valuation Office Agency consistently undervalues the cost of rents, making future building impossible. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me, and GPs from my constituency, in order to understand the problem better?

Wes Streeting: Thanks to the investment that we have announced, those practices will be upgraded. I advise the hon. Gentleman to engage with his local ICB. We are happy to receive representations if we can help, but let me gently point out that the investment is only possible thanks to the decisions made by the Chancellor, which he opposed.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): Ladies Walk NHS health centre in Sedgley is a vital hub for my constituents, providing essential services such as phlebotomy and diabetic foot care, but owing to the inaction of the Conservative council this much-needed community asset faces closure in 2026, leaving residents without access to critical care. Will my hon. Friend agree to meet me to discuss urgent steps to safeguard the future of the centre and ensure that Sedgley residents continue to receive the NHS services on which they rely?

Stephen Kinnock: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who is a qualified physiotherapist, and who is right to refer to the value of community care. I would be happy to meet her to discuss the important issue that she has raised.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What steps will be taken to support more community pharmacies that can offer a broad range of services to people in rural areas, to ensure that those who are most isolated from busy towns still have access to those important services?

Stephen Kinnock: As I said earlier, we are giving pharmacies a record 19% uplift to £3.1 billion, and I am pleased to confirm that of all the sectors in the NHS they received the best uplift in the 2025-26 settlement. We have also maintained the pharmacy access scheme, which provides £19 million to support pharmacies in areas where there are fewer of them, including the rural areas that the hon. Gentleman mentioned.

Jon Trickett (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): Pharmacies play a key role in communities in rural areas such as mine, but it is deeply frustrating when the supply chain breaks down and a pharmacy cannot deliver its medicine. Can the Minister tell me where we are now with the supply chain? Will she also thank all the heroic workers up and down the country who are doing their very best to deliver medicines, and will she thank in particular the 400 Superdrug workers in my constituency who are trying to make the supply chain work?

Karin Smyth: I am pleased to congratulate the pharmacies that are on the frontline on their hard work, and also to congratulate all those in the Department and elsewhere who ensure that our supply chain is as resilient as possible. I know that this issue concerns many Members and many of our constituents, and we hope to arrange a parliamentary event to ensure that Members have more information. Those people do a great deal of work; we know that the issue is important, and I will update the House on other measures that we intend to take to ensure that Members and their constituents are better informed.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Last month I began to receive concerning emails from employees of the NHS trusts in my constituency, saying that the trusts were seeking to create a subsidiary company and move staff into it. They are really worried about their future rights. I know how important it is to the Secretary of State that people have good employment rights. What steps is he taking to ensure that there is full consultation with staff before the creation of subsidiaries, and to prevent the creation of two-tier employment practices in the NHS with no continuity of service?

Wes Streeting: While I understand the desirability of such arrangements for NHS trusts, this Government are absolutely clear that staff must be in receipt of good NHS terms and conditions, and must feel part of the NHS workforce and the NHS family. I would be happy to receive further representations from the hon. Lady.

Counter Terrorism Policing: Arrests

3.44 pm

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the series of national security-related arrests that took place on Saturday 3 May. Protecting our national security is the first duty of Government, and it is a testament to our world-leading law enforcement and intelligence services that, through their tireless commitment, so many plots against the UK have been thwarted. I pay tribute to them again today for the work that they have done not just this weekend, but in recent weeks and months, on these important operations.

The two operations that took place across multiple locations this weekend were significant and complex. They were some of the largest counter-state threats and counter-terrorism actions that we have seen in recent times, and I am sure the whole House will want to join me in thanking the police, the security services and other partner agencies across the country, who showed their professionalism and expertise in carrying out these operations to keep our country safe.

Right hon. and hon. Members will understand that these are complex investigations. The police and the security services need time and space to be able to pursue their investigations, and our first priority must be to protect the integrity of that work so that we do not cut across those investigations and operations at a crucial time. However, these are serious matters, and the House will rightly want to remain informed. I will therefore outline as much detail as I am able, and I hope that right hon. and hon. Members will understand that there is a strict limit to what I can say at this stage, given that investigations are now ongoing.

I will first outline the facts around the events on Saturday 3 May. Throughout the day, counter-terrorism police undertook a series of arrests relating to two separate investigations. In total, eight men were arrested by the Metropolitan police's Counter Terrorism Command. Five men were arrested on suspicion of preparation of a terrorist act, contrary to section 5 of the Terrorism Act 2006, as part of a proactive investigation in the areas of west London, Swindon, Rochdale, Stockport and Manchester. All five men are Iranian nationals. While four of the individuals remain in police custody, the fifth has now been bailed with strict conditions.

As part of the investigation, police officers carried out searches at a number of addresses in the Greater Manchester, London and Swindon areas. Investigations continue, with searches and activity still under way at multiple addresses across the country. The investigation relates to a suspected plot to target specific premises. Police officers have been in contact with the affected site's representatives to make them aware and provide relevant security advice and support. However, the police have also been clear that for reasons of operational security and public safety, they are not—and I am not—able to provide further information on the target at this time, and I urge Members not to speculate about the site.

In a separate police investigation, two men were arrested at two different addresses in north-west London, and one man was arrested at an address in west London. All three were arrested under the National Security Act 2023. These three men are also Iranian nationals, and

remain in police custody. I can confirm to the House that these are the first Iranian nationals arrested under the National Security Act.

The operations to execute these eight arrests under both counter-terror and counter-state threat powers—in different parts of the country, and in the space of 24 hours—were intensive. They involved a range of different organisations, including different police forces, counter-terror police, the National Crime Agency, and our security and intelligence services. These operations were co-ordinated through the world-leading Counter Terrorism Operations Centre, which brings together and co-ordinates the UK's agencies, alongside the agencies of our Five Eyes partners, to detect and tackle national security threats. I welcome the work of the previous Government to establish CTCOC in 2021, and this Government have continued to support it and invest in it since taking office.

The significant point about both counter-terrorism and counter-state threats powers is that they allow the police to intervene early to prevent and disrupt threats, not just respond after events have taken place. This is crucial for public safety, but it also makes the investigations more complex, and that is why the police need the time and space to pursue them now, so we will not be providing a running commentary on the work that they are doing. However, what now follows is an incredibly complex set of investigations, involving hundreds more officers carrying out forensic searches, collecting vital evidence across different sites across the country and securing witness statements, backed up by the continued efforts of our security and intelligence agencies. This is careful, painstaking work.

At this stage in the operations and investigations, it would not be appropriate for me to speculate on or comment further on the details of these two cases and the motivations behind any of the threats that were posed. However, the House will be aware that these operations come against a backdrop of complex, interconnected threats to the UK, where state threats and counter-terrorism as well as serious and organised crime are intertwined together.

For 20 years, the greatest focus of our national security work was on terrorism—primarily from Islamist terrorism, with additional threats from Northern Ireland-related terrorism and other areas—and those threats have not gone away. Fifteen terrorist attacks have taken place since 2017, and there have been 43 late-stage disruptions of terrorism plots, but alongside that we have seen a serious, growing and complex challenge from state threats. Last year, Sir Ken McCallum, the director general of MI5, said that MI5 state threat investigations had increased by 48% in the previous 12 months. He added that, since January 2022, the police and MI5 had responded to 20 Iran-backed plots presenting potentially lethal threats.

In March, I told Parliament that the UK is facing a growing and evolving threat from malign activity carried out by a number of states. My statement in March outlined the Government's response to the unacceptable threat that we face from the Iranian state, and the steps we are taking to ensure that our intelligence and law enforcement agencies have the tools they need to disrupt and degrade Iran's malign activity on UK soil. We have delivered on the commitments made. I announced that the whole of the Iranian state, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Ministry of

[Dan Jarvis]

Intelligence and Security, would be placed on the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme. I laid the regulations to make this happen in the House on 1 April and committed to bring the scheme into force on 1 July. I trust that all Members will vote in favour when those regulations are debated shortly.

Let me be clear: anyone in the UK who works for the Iranian state must declare it or they will be committing a serious criminal offence. We will also go after the criminal networks and enablers that Iran uses to carry out its work. Last month, the Government sanctioned the Foxtrot network—a network involved in violence against Jewish and Israeli targets in Europe on behalf of the Iranian regime. Training and guidance on state threats activity is now being offered by Counter Terrorism Policing to all 45 territorial police forces across the UK.

The independent reviewer of terrorism and state threats legislation, Jonathan Hall KC, was asked by the Home Secretary to review the parts of our counter-terrorism framework that could be applied to modern-day state threats such as those from Iran. The Home Secretary specifically asked the reviewer to look at a state threats proscription tool, so we are not held back by limitations in applying counter-terrorism legislation to state threats. Jonathan Hall has now completed his review and will publish it shortly, and the Government will not hesitate to take action in response to Mr Hall's advice.

As we continue to support the police and the security services in their investigations, I can also tell the House that the Home Secretary has instigated a series of security assessments that are being done or refreshed in the light of the cases this weekend and the further information surrounding them, which will ensure that the Government can respond robustly and comprehensively to any wider national security issues raised by these cases.

Working alongside our international allies to counter state threats is central to our success. The Foreign Office is engaging with our closest allies to outline the disruptive action that has taken place and will be considering potential future response options as the investigation progresses. The Home Secretary remains in close contact with my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, who is committed to doing everything necessary to protect the country from these threats and to bring to bear all the diplomatic tools at our disposal.

The Home Secretary and Ministers will provide an update on the national security position when we are able to do so, following both these operations and investigations and the wider security assessments that are under way. The Government will not hesitate to act robustly to respond to these plots at the appropriate time, but first, we must allow the investigations to continue. Our police, security and intelligence agencies are the best in the world and stand ready at all times to take action to keep our country safe. I am sure they will have the support of the whole House as they continue this vital work. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

3.56 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): I thank the Minister for providing advance sight of his statement on this critical issue. People will have read the deeply

concerning report suggesting that an attack may have been just hours away, and this will understandably be worrying to people across the country.

This statement reminds us of the tragic incidents that have plagued our country in the past. This month marks 12 years since the death of Lee Rigby on our streets, as well as eight years since the horrific Manchester Arena bombing. Later this year, we will also mark the 20th anniversary of the 7/7 attacks, which brought to London a level of destruction that many of us never thought we would see in our lifetimes. These acts of terror, along with other cowardly acts, caused untold hurt to victims and their families.

As we discuss the arrests over the past weekend, we must remember the importance of keeping the British public safe from those who seek to terrorise us, and I therefore pay tribute to the hard-working members of the police and intelligence services for their bravery in disrupting terrorist activities. In October, the head of MI5 said that the police and MI5 had together disrupted 43 late-stage attack plots since the Manchester bombing. We must remember that each of these cases is not merely a statistic, but represents someone's life and someone's future.

I commend the Minister for recognising the work of the previous Government and for acknowledging the measures that were used effectively in this incident. In turn, we will support measures that enact the National Security Act and give the Government the powers needed to act against malign influences on our country.

Turning to the incidents at hand, I would be grateful if the Minister could clarify certain points. While I am thankful for today's statement, I hope the Government will be as transparent as possible about the details to avoid the vacuum of information we have previously discussed in this place. While I appreciate that the Government do not want to provide a running commentary, like many other Members I would be grateful if the Government could be as open as possible, given the seriousness of the arrests.

As the Minister has outlined, there were two separate arrests of Iranian nationals in relation to terror offences, which has raised serious questions about how their networks were formed and what their intentions were. Can the Minister provide any further information about the suspects? For example, while we know they were Iranian nationals, what is their immigration status? Was the state aware that these individuals were in the UK, and was there any prior indication of the risk they might pose?

On the broader issue of Iran, while I understand that the Minister may not be able to comment on proscription directly, the Home Secretary did address this while in opposition.

In July 2023, she told the Royal United Services Institute that

"instead of trying and failing to use counter-terror legislation to proscribe organisations like Wagner or IRGC, we will introduce a bespoke proscribing mechanism to address state-sponsored threats."

She also said at the Dispatch Box in April 2024 that Labour wanted

"appropriately targeted proscription-style restrictions on the operations of state-linked organisations such as the IRGC."—[*Official Report*, 15 April 2024; Vol. 748, c. 19.]

However, it was only in March of this year that the Minister for Security announced the review by Jonathan Hall. Does he share my concerns that these mixed signals and the delay suggest a lack of prioritisation by the Government? Ultimately, we must all work together to ensure that the UK adopts the strongest possible stance on national security. As cross-party co-operation is essential, I urge the Government to take every possible step to prevent these cowardly acts of terror.

Dan Jarvis: I thank the shadow Minister for the sensible, reasonable and constructive tone of his response. He is absolutely right to draw the House's attention to the tragic death of Lee Rigby, the tragic bombing in Manchester and, of course, the 20th anniversary of the 7/7 bombings that we will be commemorating in a couple of months' time.

Let me join the shadow Minister in paying tribute to all those who work tirelessly to keep our country safe. It is one of the greatest privileges of this particular role that we have the opportunity to serve in government, as Conservative Members will also have done, and to work closely alongside those incredibly committed members of the police and the intelligence services; we owe them a debt of gratitude.

I am also grateful for the opportunity that the shadow Minister has afforded me to offer our thanks for the work that was done by the previous Government, both in introducing the National Security Act 2023, which has proved to be an incredibly valuable tool, and in creating CTOC, which is delivering very significant operational value. I can absolutely give an assurance that this Government, like the previous one, will continue to invest in that institution.

The shadow Minister made an important point about transparency, and I can give him the reassurances that he seeks. He and the House will understand that we are just a couple of days on from those arrests that took place on Saturday. The Home Secretary will provide a further update as soon as we are operationally able to do so. I give the shadow Minister a commitment that we will be as transparent as possible while of course ensuring that we do not cut across live counter-terrorism operations.

The shadow Minister mentioned proscription, and I understand why. I know that he will acknowledge—or at least I hope that he will—that on 4 March I announced a very strong suite of measures designed to most effectively address the nature of the threat that we face from Iran. Contained within those measures was a request from the Home Secretary for Jonathan Hall, who I know is held in very high regard because of the experience and credibility that he has in this area, to look very carefully at the legislative framework that might enable us to more effectively proscribe state-based entities. I can confirm that Mr Hall has completed his report and that the Home Secretary and I are considering it very carefully. It will be published shortly. I assure the shadow Minister that we will not hesitate to act if there is a requirement to bring forward further measures.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that a number of Iranian citizens in this country still have relatives in Iran, and it is not beyond the wit of the Iranian Government to use that pressure on them. In requiring the citizens of Iran in this country to report to our Government if they are in any way

connected to the Iranian Government, has he taken measures to protect them from exposing their family to the pressure that the Iranian Government may put on them?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend raises a very important point, and I can give him the assurances he seeks. The Government have been very carefully considering the matter of transnational repression. The Home Secretary and I will have more to say in the near future, but I can give him absolute assurance that we have been thinking carefully about these matters and take them incredibly seriously.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I thank the Minister for updating the House and for advance sight of his statement. I also add my thanks to the security services and the police for all their work to keep us safe.

Over recent years Members have been called to this Chamber to discuss plots to commit acts of terror on Britain's streets at the hands of the Iranian regime—but consecutive Governments are yet to proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organisation. In opposition, the now Foreign Secretary said:

“The IRGC is behaving like a terrorist organisation and must now be proscribed as such.”

Earlier this year I asked the Minister precisely this question: does he not agree that now is surely the time? In his earlier remarks, he mentioned the review that has concluded. If now is not the time for proscription, when should the House expect a further update?

The Liberal Democrats have welcomed previous sanctions against those linked to the Iranian regime. However, I urge the Government to go a step further and look closely at whether those individuals and others with links to the regime have assets here in the UK. Will the Minister commit to carrying out an audit, so that we know where those assets are, enabling the Government to freeze them as appropriate? The Minister is right to reference the long-standing pattern by the Iranian intelligence service of targeting people of the Jewish faith and of Israeli nationality. Could he update the House on any conversations he has had with the UK Jewish community leadership, specifically the Community Security Trust, about threats here in the UK?

Dan Jarvis: I thank the hon. Lady for, as is always the case, the very sensible and reasonable way in which she has phrased her questions. I am always available to discuss these matters in more detail should she wish to do so. To her question on proscription, I hope she will acknowledge the response I gave to the shadow Minister a few moments ago.

We take these matters incredibly seriously. The Home Secretary and I looked at them very closely in opposition, and that is precisely why the Home Secretary commissioned Jonathan Hall. He is the right person to look carefully at our legislative framework and make recommendations about whether we can toughen and strengthen our laws in this particular area. Mr Hall has now concluded his report; we are looking very closely at it, and it will be published shortly. As I said to the shadow Minister, we will not hesitate to bring forward further measures as required.

[*Dan Jarvis*]

The hon. Lady made an important and helpful point about sanctions and assets, and I know it will have been heard by the Foreign Office Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), with whom we work incredibly closely. We work hard to ensure that our response is always as joined up across Government as it can be. The Home Secretary works very closely with the Foreign Secretary, and I work very closely with my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln on these matters, and we will consider whether further measures need to be taken.

The hon. Lady's final point about the Jewish community is a very important one. I give her and the whole House an absolute commitment that we will work tirelessly to ensure the safety of the Jewish community in our country. The Home Secretary and I, and other Ministers, are in regular contact with members of that community, including the CST, which she referenced and which does an excellent job. I will be meeting them in the very near future, and the hon. Lady can be reassured that we will work very closely with them to ensure that they get the protection that they need and deserve, and the assurances that they rightly want.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to the bravery and professionalism of the counter-terrorist specialist firearms officers who took part in the arrest of an Iranian national in Rochdale over the weekend. It was a reminder of not only the constant threat that we face, but the intelligence and police services' daily work to keep us all safe. Does the Minister agree that in this week of the 80th anniversary of VE Day, it is a reminder too that Britain is at war with a modern enemy: the fascism of Islamist extremism and state-sponsored terrorism? The message should go out loud and clear that my town, our country and this House will never surrender to such terrorism or to its ideology.

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend makes a powerful and important point. He is absolutely right that the Government will never drop their guard to the threats that we undoubtedly face in countering terrorism, whether the specific threat around Islamist extremism or state threats. We take these matters incredibly seriously, and we will work to ensure that all our security services and police forces have the resources and tools they need to address the threats we face.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement. No one in the House should be in any doubt about the threat that Iran poses to us and our national security. How confident is he that its designation in the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme will be effective? Is he looking to go further?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for the work she does as Chair of the Select Committee. FIRS is an important measure, which we inherited from the previous Government, from the National Security and Investment Act 2021. I think it is the right approach and that it will deliver significant operational benefit, but we must also look at these matters in the round, so that it does not sit in isolation; it has to be accompanied

by a range of other measures, not least those that I announced on 4 March. The Government will remain flexible and agile, and if we think that there is a need for further action, we will not hesitate to take it.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): The Joint Committee on Human Rights, of which I am a member, is currently undertaking an inquiry on transnational repression. We have reams of evidence of Iran oppressing and taking action against people of Iranian heritage here in the UK. I heard what the Minister said about proscription, and I have asked many times for proscription of the IRGC, as it is certainly one of the bodies in Iran that is responsible for transnational repression. Will he outline what will happen after the publication of Jonathan Hall's review? What will the timetable be? We are keen to see swift action in this area.

Dan Jarvis: I am looking forward—if that is the right way to describe it—to giving evidence to my hon. Friend's Committee in the near future. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh), I confirm that the Government have done a lot of work looking at the serious but complicated issue of transnational repression. The Government will have more to say about this in the near future. I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) that we take these matters incredibly seriously. We have progressed at pace the work that we inherited from the previous Government. These are not simple matters; they require a whole-system approach, and we are working carefully on them across Government through the defending democracy taskforce. I assure the House that the Home Secretary and I will have more to say in the near future.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Do we know whether these men entered the country illegally or legally? Obviously, people who enter the country legally are subject to extraordinarily sophisticated surveillance at our airports and ports, but for people who enter illegally there is no surveillance at all. It is madness that thousands are entering our country with no checks at all. Is this not a good opportunity to seek a derogation from the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg and say that, because of our national security, we should have the right to detain these people, arrest them and rapidly deport them?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for the long-standing experience he brings to the House. He will understand, for the reasons that I have outlined, that there are strict limitations on what Ministers can say at this point, because it would be unforgivable to cut across a live counter-terrorism investigation. The police have set out the Iranian nationality of those arrested, and at this moment they need the time to pursue various lines of inquiry and investigation.

I hope that the right hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members will understand that, as a consequence, it would be wrong for Ministers to provide a running commentary on individuals' details at this stage. As Members would expect, a wide range of security assessments are under way. The Home Secretary will set out further details in due course.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and join him in thanking our security services and police for their incredible work and dedication.

This is a sobering reminder of the threat posed by the Iranian regime here in the UK and reinforces the need to proscribe Iran's terror army, the IRGC. We continue to hear disturbing reports of charities in the UK being used as vehicles for the funding and organisation of terrorism. Will the Minister set out what steps are being taken to stop that organisation, and will he meet me to further discuss those concerns?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his work in this area. He is absolutely right to make the point about the grave threat. I hope that he will have seen the suite of new measures that the Government brought forward on 4 March, which will make a significant difference and give us additional resources and capabilities to address the threat. I can assure him that we take these matters incredibly seriously. As I mentioned, a series of security assessments are under way. The Home Secretary will report back to the House on those in due course, but I will be happy to meet him to discuss those matters further.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): I thank the Minister for what he said about the work of the previous Government and join him in commending the work of our security services and police in keeping us safe.

Recent events are a reminder of the destabilising role that Iran plays, with 20 Iran-backed plots foiled in the UK in just the past few years. This state sponsor of terrorism cannot be allowed to have nuclear weapons. On that topic, may I urge the Government to push our European allies to jointly trigger snapback sanctions this year as part of a comprehensive strategy to put maximum pressure on the Iranian regime?

Dan Jarvis: May I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question and for the work he did as Prime Minister? He knows better than most the extraordinary capabilities that the men and women who serve in our intelligence and police forces have and the commitment that they make to our country.

He made important points. He is completely right about the number of state-sponsored plots. That is totally unacceptable, and this Government, as was the case with the previous Government, are absolutely clear that we will do everything that we can to stand against them. He made an important point about working closely with our colleagues and partners in Europe and internationally. He is right; that is the approach that we will adopt and colleagues in the Foreign Office are thinking carefully about what more we can do in that area.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): May I thank the Minister for his statement and join him in paying tribute to the security services that keep us all safe? As he knows, the UK is under constant cyber-attack from states, including Iran. Will he update the House on what work the Home Office is doing to protect the UK from ransomware attacks?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend because he raises an important point about cyber-attacks, which we face, along with countries around the world. I hope

he knows that the Home Office has recently concluded a consultation on new, world-leading measures against ransomware, which we believe will make a material difference to the nature of the threat we face. Essentially, we want to smash the business models of those cyber-criminals, many of whom operate out of Russia, targeting UK businesses. The measures would be good for both our national security and our economic prosperity. I assure my hon. Friend that we are progressing them at pace.

Mr Tom Morrison (Cheadle) (LD): I was alarmed to hear that one of the incidents took place in my constituency of Cheadle. It is chilling to think that a regime with such a shocking record of international aggression could have connections into our neighbourhoods.

It just so happens that I met the Jewish community in Cheadle this weekend to talk through their issues and concerns. At the meeting, I heard how fearful they are of the threat of violence and terrorism from the Iranian regime, so will the Minister commit to providing a timeline for producing the report on the IRGC and for when we will finally proscribe that organisation?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Member is right about the chilling effect of these arrests, which also underline the nature of the threat not being specific to any one part of the country. He presses me on the point I made earlier about proscription. Jonathan Hall is, as I have said previously from the Dispatch Box, someone of great credibility and authority. He was asked by the Home Secretary to look carefully at our legislative framework and to assess whether we need stronger powers in order to proscribe state-backed threats. Mr Hall has worked at pace and has now submitted his report to the Home Secretary and me. The report will be published shortly and, as I have said, the Government will respond in due course. I know that the Home Secretary will update the House at the earliest available moment.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): The Security Minister will know that whenever there are reports of hostile acts by an Iranian national in this country, the Jewish community in Britain have reason to be fearful, so can he update the House on the steps the Government are taking to guarantee the safety of Jewish people throughout the UK?

Dan Jarvis: I can give my hon. Friend a categorical assurance that this Government will work incredibly closely with the Jewish community, as did the previous Government, to provide them with the assurances that they rightly want and deserve. It is completely unacceptable that any sector of our community could be threatened, whether by terrorism or by a state-based threat. The Home Secretary and I, and other Ministers, are in regular contact with the Community Security Trust and a range of other organisations from the Jewish community, and we work tirelessly to ensure that they not only are safe but feel safe.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): In the fullness of time, it will undoubtedly be revealed what the targets of these terrorist plots were going to be. If it turns out that one of them was again the broadcaster Iran International, which had to relocate to Washington temporarily in 2023, will the Minister undertake to speak with his Foreign Office colleagues about the importance of impressing on the Trump Administration that these repressive regimes fear free broadcasting agencies,

[Sir Julian Lewis]

and that that is why the Trump Administration should not be closing down Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty or indeed Voice of America itself?

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman makes a sage point, as he always does, and he is absolutely right. The UK has an incredibly important relationship with the United States, and it is a relationship that we invest significantly in. That is not only in our national interest but in the national interest of the United States and other Five Eyes partners. I can give him an assurance that the question he has just raised will be heard by colleagues.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer) *indicated assent.*

Dan Jarvis: I see the Foreign Office Minister nodding. I am keen to work closely with the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) and draw on his experience in this area, and I agree with the thrust of the points he has made.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for coming here with this statement. May I also put on record my thanks and the thanks of the people of Harlow to the police and security services for the work they do keeping us all safe? In his statement the Minister made reference to working with allies. Does he agree that the conversations he has with our allies, both in Europe and America, are key to tackling this problem proactively and ensuring that lives are saved?

Dan Jarvis: First, I thank my hon. Friend for his point about our police forces, who do a very difficult job. They do it incredibly well and it was deeply impressive to see their work over the course of the weekend. He also makes an important point about international co-operation. The Home Secretary and I, and other Ministers across Government, completely understand the importance of investing in these relationships with our international allies. These are matters that we are not going to solve unilaterally on our own. We need to co-operate and collaborate with a range of international partners in Europe, in North America and further afield, and I assure him that that will be the approach of this Government.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): I, too, pay tribute to the brilliance of our security forces. The Minister has paid tribute to the quality of advice from Jonathan Hall KC, the independent reviewer of terrorism, and said that he will indeed listen to that advice. Well, that same Jonathan Hall KC last autumn advised that in serious incidents involving terror such as these, it would be better to put out more information sooner in order to prevent misinformation. In order to prevent misinformation, surely the Minister should tell us—and the British people, who want to know—how long these Iranian nationals have been in this country and what their immigration status is.

Dan Jarvis: That is precisely why I made the point to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers), about the importance of transparency. It is precisely why the Government have proactively

brought forward a statement to the House to give Members the opportunity to ask questions, and why I gave a commitment earlier that the Home Secretary will update the House when we are operationally able to do so. I know the hon. Member understands the importance of not cutting across a live police terrorism operation. I hope he will acknowledge that we take these matters incredibly seriously and that we brought forward a range of measures in March that go a long way to addressing the nature of the threat we face. I hope he acknowledges the serious way we always take these matters, but I am happy to discuss them with him outside the Chamber should he wish to do so.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): I also pay tribute to our security and intelligence services in foiling what appears to be a highly co-ordinated plot. The involvement of Iranian nationals points to a potential state-backed threat. Can the Minister assure me and my constituents that our intelligence and legal frameworks are keeping pace with the growing sophistication of hostile activity on British soil?

Dan Jarvis: I can assure my hon. Friend that our intelligence and legal frameworks have the necessary resource to ensure that we are best prepared to face the nature of the threat that we undoubtedly face. I also say to him that the Home Secretary, the Prime Minister and Ministers across Government will not hesitate to act should there be a requirement to bring forward further measures. That is precisely why the Home Secretary asked Mr Hall to look at the legislative framework and why we are carefully considering his recommendations. But I absolutely give him the assurance that should there be a need to bring forward further powers, we will not hesitate to do so.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): It is clear that the issues we see from Iran and its proxies are shared across many European countries. The Minister raised the recent Government sanctions on the Foxtrot network. However, the EU has just rejected the PM's bid to access the bloc's crime and migration database. Does the Minister see that as an issue that would stop us thwarting future threats from Iran and its proxies?

Dan Jarvis: Let me respond to the hon. Member in this way: as I have said previously, while there are certain measures we could put in place in this country, and of course we will, it is imperative that we co-operate closely with our allies. The nature of the relationship that we have with our allies in Europe is fundamentally important in this regard. I can give him an assurance that Foreign Office Ministers—the Foreign Secretary and the Minister—will be looking closely at what has happened over previous days, talking to our allies and taking every opportunity to ensure we organise collectively to ensure that those states who think they can behave in an aggressive way towards this and other countries understand that there will be very severe consequences for their actions.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that part of the problem with the joint comprehensive plan of action that the US withdrew from in 2018 was that it was not comprehensive enough in that it completely ignored the actions of Iran

through proxy groups and terror cells? When he and his colleagues are discussing the way forward with the US Administration, particularly in relation to the Witkoff talks, will he ensure that terrorism is covered as part of any agreement that is patched?

Dan Jarvis: That is an important point that the Minister and I will consider further, but I can give the right hon. Member an assurance about our understanding, and about the priority that we attach to the international dynamic in all this. He will understand, as a former Minister and as someone who has been around a long time, that international relations require us to work as collaboratively as we can with our partners. We are investing heavily in ensuring that our special relationship continues to deliver for our country and for other Five Eyes partners. His points are well made; we have heard them, and will consider them further. I assure him that we take these matters very seriously, and will work across Government to address the issues that he raises.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I join the Minister in paying tribute to our security services and their endeavours to keep us all safe. Does he agree that the issue of how these suspects get into the United Kingdom in the first place is crucial? Has he addressed with the Irish Republic's Government the issue of people who come here not directly, but under the radar, via Dublin, and who then go into Northern Ireland and to mainland GB?

Dan Jarvis: The Prime Minister has said that border security is national security, so the hon. Member makes an important point. That is precisely why I confirmed earlier that, as a consequence of recent events, the Home Secretary is looking very carefully, along with other Home Office Ministers, at a number of areas. At the earliest available opportunity, she will come back to the House to provide an update.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Five weeks ago, I visited Iran International at its London location. It told me that its journalists face daily threats from Iran, as do those who work for the BBC Persian service. Given that it is just three days after World Press Freedom Day, will the Minister reiterate this Government's determination to defend media freedom at home as well as abroad, and will he consider accepting an invitation to visit Iran International, to reinforce that message?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, who is a long-standing champion of journalism and journalists; he makes some very important points. I know that the Minister has recently met BBC Persian journalists, and between us, we will look carefully at the invitation that the right hon. Gentleman has extended. Let me be crystal clear that the threats we have seen in recent times to Iran International are completely unacceptable. This Government, like the previous Government, will do everything to ensure that free speech in this country is not materially affected by those outwith the country who wish to silence others. We take these matters incredibly seriously. In response to an earlier question, I said that the Government will have more to say about transnational repression in due course, and that very much includes such matters as the right hon. Gentleman raised.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I am going to try again, because although I appreciate that the Security Minister has to be very careful about specific aspects of this case, the House and the country need to know whether the Iranian nationals came into the UK illegally or on a legal migration route.

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Lady is a very experienced Member, so I hope she can understand why it would be wrong of me, as the Security Minister, to cut across a live police terrorism investigation. Ministers should not get in front or in the way of ongoing proceedings. I hope she will acknowledge the point I made about the complexity of the ongoing investigations. There are still properties around the country being searched by police officers. I have come here to give a statement and update the House with precisely the information that it is appropriate to provide. I have also given a very clear commitment that at the earliest available opportunity when it is operationally appropriate to do so, the Home Secretary will come to this place and give more details.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The Minister said in his statement that these were "some of the largest counter-state threats and counter-terrorism actions that we have seen in recent times".

If that is the case, I wonder why the Iranian ambassador has not been summoned to the Foreign Office; the Minister mentioned liaising with the Foreign Secretary. The issue of immigration status is not a police or counter-terrorism operational matter; it is a visa issue. Were any of these Iranian nationals dual nationals? Were they here on work or student visas, and were those visas issued at post, or somewhere else around the world, through another embassy or consulate? We have had incidents in this country in which there has been a vacuum of information, and when the Government have not been prepared to fill that vacuum with truth and facts, others who want to stir up trouble in our nation have filled it instead.

Dan Jarvis: I am always grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for the experience that he brings on these important matters. He is right to say that this was a significant operation that required considerable co-ordination across the weekend, and as I have explained, it is ongoing. It is very important that I do not in any way prejudice the inquiries, but I understand why he has made his point in the way that he has. There has been very close contact between the Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary on these matters, and the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Falconer), who is sitting on the Front Bench, will meet the Iranian ambassador to discuss these matters.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): The Prime Minister says that border security is national security, but how can there be national security if there are no border checks on illegal immigrants at the international frontier between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland? How do we get security if we refuse to carry out those fundamental checks?

Dan Jarvis: That is precisely why I referenced the Prime Minister's comments about the importance of border security, and border security being national security, and why I said that the Home Secretary and the immigration

[*Dan Jarvis*]

Minister were looking carefully at what happened over the weekend, as well as at other incidents. We will not hesitate to act where there is a requirement to do so, and as I have said, the Home Secretary will update the House further on these matters.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I thank the Minister for coming to the House with his statement today. I do not want to probe the “out of bounds” box that he has rightly placed around a live investigation, so I have chosen the words of this question carefully: does he know the immigration status of the Iranian nationals who were arrested?

Dan Jarvis: I pay tribute to the hon. Member for his service in our armed forces before coming to this House. I hope that, in part because of that background, he will understand that the one thing I am not going to do is make things more difficult for those who serve in and out of uniform, and do a very difficult job. The Home Secretary and I know what we need to know, but we will not get into giving a running commentary. I have made a very clear commitment that the Home Secretary will come back at the earliest available opportunity and respond to the questions that hon. Members wish to put to her. We are not going to cut across a live police operation—Conservative Members and those from around the House would rightly never forgive us for doing so—but we are committed to providing as much information as we can at a point when that does not compromise ongoing operations.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his wise, strong, confident words—words that I think all Members of the House wish to hear in relation to this investigation. In all my time in this Chamber, which is coming up to 15 years, I have been a supporter of the Iranian diaspora in the United Kingdom—those people who fled Iran because of threats

to their life. Some got out by the skin of their teeth. They have genuine fears and concerns about what is happening, and those concerns have been expressed by members of the Iranian diaspora who have been under attack in France—Paris is one example—and in Sweden. During the last election, the Iranian diaspora kindly offered support to me for my election campaign, which I took advantage of, as others did. Members of that diaspora in Northern Ireland feel threatened, just like those on the mainland. Offering the support and protection that they need will involve partnership with the Garda Síochána in the Republic of Ireland, as the threat could come from beyond Northern Ireland; it could potentially come from the Republic of Ireland. Will the Minister give a commitment on that to me, my constituents, and those who are committed to a change of regime in Iran but cannot return, because the regime there is so decadent, violent and evil?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, as always. He has a long track record of standing up for those who have been persecuted because of their ethnicity or religion, and he raises a very important point about the Iranian diaspora in this country. That is precisely why this Government have progressed an important piece of work on transnational repression. We will work together closely through the defending democracy taskforce to ensure that all the necessary protections are in place for those individuals or communities who feel threatened.

My advice to anybody who feels threatened is to report that to the police. I recently wrote to all chief constables to ensure that the training available for frontline officers is taken up by police forces right around the country. It is very important that officers on the beat have the necessary understanding of the nature of the threat that many diaspora communities may face. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for championing not only his constituency but the Iranian diaspora, and I give him the same commitment that I have given to other right hon. and hon. Members: this Government will work tirelessly to ensure that the diaspora is protected.

Trade Negotiations

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Before I call the Minister to make his statement, can I say how disappointing it was to see details of the India trade deal released to the media a few hours ago, before the Minister came to this House?

4.42 pm

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): I wish to make a statement on the progress that this Government have made towards a UK-India trade deal. I am delighted to inform the House that we have now concluded negotiations on a comprehensive, modern agreement with the fastest-growing economy in the G20.

Hon. Members will no doubt be aware that India is expected to be the third-largest economy in the world by 2028. By the end of this decade, it will be home to an estimated 60 million middle-class consumers, and with trade between the United Kingdom and India already standing at north of £43 billion, we know that this powerhouse economy is and will remain a hugely important market for British businesses. While past Governments have failed to negotiate a deal with India, this Government have today succeeded. We have brokered the most generous trade deal ever agreed by India in its history.

From day one of this deal coming into force, it will make trade between our countries cheaper, easier and quicker. UK exporters will benefit from much lower tariffs across a whole host of sectors, including those that we are prioritising in our industrial strategy. It means simplified customs processes for businesses in advanced manufacturing and aerospace, in the food and beverage sector, and in the creative sector, which will benefit from improved copyright protection.

For our world-leading financial and professional services companies, this deal locks in access to India's fast-growing market. It will ensure that UK banks and finance companies are placed on an equal footing with Indian suppliers, and it encourages the recognition of professional qualifications, so that UK and Indian firms can access the right talent at the right time, whether they are in Mumbai or Manchester. This deal will unlock new opportunities for businesses in every part of the United Kingdom, including our advanced manufacturing companies in the north-east, our iconic Scottish whisky brands and our car plants in the west midlands. In all, we will have secured over £400 million in tariff reductions in the first year alone, doubling to around £900 million after just 10 years.

Crucially, the deal we have negotiated will provide bespoke support for small and medium-sized enterprises to enter the Indian market, alongside a firm commitment from India to address the trade barriers that those businesses face. Since taking office, we have committed to hardwiring the views and interests of small businesses into everything we do, and the deal we have negotiated is evidence of that. For the very first time, British businesses will have guaranteed access to India's vast procurement market, covering goods, services and construction. They will be able to bid for approximately 40,000 tenders worth at least £38 billion a year.

The deal that we have just got over the line is further proof that this Government are using the power of international trade and investment to raise living standards

here at home. Indeed, experts predict that it will boost our bilateral trade by some £25.5 billion. It is also projected to increase UK wages by £2.2 billion each year, while adding nearly £5 billion to our GDP over the long run.

We have done all that while defending stoutly the UK's national interest. We have brokered a deal that protects our NHS and upholds our high food standards. It ensures that our points-based immigration system remains unaffected. The deal demonstrates our commitment to both workers and businesses, staying true to our Labour values while contributing to our primary mission of economic growth.

I recognise that this House will need time to scrutinise the deal before the ratification process. My Department will follow the process set out in the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 in sharing the finalised treaty text with hon. Members. The House will, of course, have the opportunity to scrutinise any legislation associated with its implementation.

This deal sends a powerful message about the UK and India's shared commitment to free, fair and open trade. The UK-India relationship has deep, enduring roots, exemplified by the living bridge of 1.9 million people of Indian heritage living in the United Kingdom. While I do not personally lament that the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) is no longer the UK's Prime Minister, it would be wholly wrong of me not to acknowledge his significant achievement as the first British-Indian Prime Minister, which is a testament not just to his own ability but to the close bonds that unite our two nations.

The Government are proud to back open markets and free trade. We recognise that Britain has always been an open, outward-looking trading nation, and we believe that open markets and free trade are fundamental building blocks with which the UK can secure its opportunities and prosperity at home and abroad. Through our upcoming trade strategy, we will set out our ambitions to engage with more industrial giants, like India, to ramp up trade and investment over the coming months and years.

Today, though, as close trading partners and as friends, I am proud that we have secured this deal with India. It is a deal that affords UK businesses certainty and stability during a time of global uncertainty and instability, and a deal that will give British businesses access to one of our biggest markets abroad, while raising wages and driving growth here at home. That is what this deal delivers, and I commend this statement to the House.

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

4.48 pm

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. This deal marks a landmark moment for the UK and its global trading relationships because it is the largest trade deal secured by this country. I was therefore shocked that the Minister did not acknowledge that progression of the deal was possible only thanks to our Brexit freedoms. After all, the European Union does not have a free trade agreement with India—something the Minister must bear in mind as he follows the orders of the Prime Minister on the EU reset.

[*Dame Harriett Baldwin*]

We have not seen the minutiae of the detail in the agreement that the Government are announcing today, so we will reserve our full judgment on the deal until we have had the opportunity to scrutinise it at length. However, I will take this opportunity to highlight some questions. First, what concessions did the Government make that their predecessors were not willing to make to get the deal over the line?

Secondly, I was shocked that a very significant piece of information was left out of the Minister's statement today—one that we only found out from the Indian Government's statement. Why did Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi make a point of announcing the agreement of a double contribution convention between India and the UK, while the Minister has not even made a passing reference to it today in his statement or his press release? A double contribution convention will come at a significant cost to the British taxpayer and British businesses. Workers who enter the UK under such conventions are eligible to only pay national insurance contributions in their home country—in this case, India.

Again, we only know from the Indian Government's press release that the exemption for national insurance contributions for Indian workers will be for three years. Does that mean that Indian workers currently in Britain will get a refund from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, or does it mean that new Indian workers will not pay any contributions in the first place? Did the Exchequer effectively give away a massive subsidy to get this trade deal over the line? Will it really be 20% cheaper for businesses in the UK to hire Indian workers than British workers? Will the convention apply only to seconded employees of Indian companies, or will it apply more broadly to all Indian workers in the UK, and if so, from when? How many additional work visas will be issued to Indian workers under this agreement? Will the convention really mean that, for example, an Indian-owned restaurant chain in the UK could pay no national insurance here for its chef, while the British pub next door pays full national insurance for its curry chef?

Will this deal reduce the incentive for the Indian millionaires who are currently fleeing the UK for tax reasons—a subset of the many millionaires who are doing the same—to do so? Can the Minister outline what the cost of this agreement is to the Treasury? How many British nationals do the Government anticipate will make use of the reciprocal rights in India? I fear that when it comes to British workers, we have gone from two-tier Keir to two-tier-taxes Keir. This Government are literally putting up taxes for British workers while cutting them for Indian workers.

I am aware that India has expressed concerns about the UK becoming a rule-taker to the EU, so will the Minister confirm what commitments and assurances he made on that matter during the negotiations? While Conservative Members will never talk down the benefits of free trade, agreements such as this one have to be made on fair terms for both parties. As it stands, this deal looks like it is subsidising Indian labour while undercutting British workers. Will the Government back our domestic market by scrapping their jobs tax?

I look forward to hearing from the Minister a reply that actually answers these questions. If he chooses—as he sometimes does—to bat away genuine questions from the Dispatch Box, could he follow up in writing?

Mr Alexander: I thank the hon. Lady for her recognition that this is a landmark deal, although I have to say that it was not her most generous welcome of a deal that the previous Government worked for many months to try to secure—it is right to recognise that, albeit they did not manage to close the most difficult remaining issues. I seem to remember that it was a former leader of the Conservative party, the former Member for Witney, who promised that his party would stop “banging on about Europe”. Alas, that advice does not seem to have been taken in the Conservatives' approach to today's landmark agreement with India.

The hon. Lady inquired how we got the deal done when our predecessors failed to do so. Respectfully, I would say that it was through a process of patient, pragmatic and painstaking work—a very different approach from the kind of Instagram diplomacy that all too often characterised the approach of past Trade Secretaries and Trade Ministers. That allowed us, with the political leadership shown by the Secretary of State, to close significant chapters on goods and services. It allowed us to then reach a considered judgment that meant that, with stability of political leadership and clarity of ministerial direction, we could secure concessions from the Indians and conclude the agreement in a way that eluded our predecessors.

The hon. Lady asked specifically about the double contribution convention. I can assure her that that reciprocal agreement will benefit UK workers and their employers as the opportunity within India expands. India will have one of the world's largest middle classes in the coming decades. The agreement will cover only a specific and limited group of Indian businesspeople for a period of three years. It is worth recognising that the Indians have other arrangements in place that extend longer than that. The workers will be required to pay their immigration health surcharge to the national health service, so the convention does not affect NHS funding.

The DCC that we have agreed is reciprocal and will benefit UK workers in India as well. India is home to the fastest growth rate in the G20, so the opportunity here for the United Kingdom is only likely to grow over time. The agreement was made in the context of the wider deal, which will bring billions into the UK economy. I can assure the hon. Lady that the United Kingdom already has social security agreements in place with a range of countries and trading blocs, including the European Union and the United States.

On the broader immigration issue that the hon. Lady raised, I can assure her that the deal does not affect the points-based system. The points-based system is not affected by the agreement that we struck today. The deal only covers business mobility, which is different from immigration, as it is about travel for specific and temporary business purposes. As a result, UK businesses will benefit from additional business mobility routes supporting them as they expand into India. Student visas remained off the table.

I hope that that gives some clarity to the hon. Lady. I am grateful for her recognition that it is a landmark deal. It is right to recognise that the Conservatives sought to secure this deal, and I hope that in the course of the conversations that we will have across this Dispatch Box today, we will be able to recognise that this represents a very significant win for the United Kingdom in very challenging times for trade.

Gregor Poynton (Livingston) (Lab): The conclusion of the negotiations on this free trade agreement is a major win for Scotland's economy and for my Livingston constituency in particular, given that we bottle Glenmorangie whisky and bake Paterson's shortbread. We also have a strong and growing digital services sector, particularly with small and medium-sized enterprises. Can the Minister say a bit more about how this deal will help those businesses, too?

Mr Alexander: I thank my hon. Friend and fellow Scottish Member of Parliament. One of the commitments that we made when we were both elected—in my case, re-elected—to the House back in July was that we would seek to ensure a Labour Government delivering for Scotland. The cut that we have secured in whisky tariffs for the huge and significant market in India is a clear and tangible example of the difference we are making. He does not need to take my word for it. These are the words of Mark Kent, the chief executive of the Scotch Whisky Association:

"The UK-India free trade agreement is a once in a generation deal and a landmark moment for Scotch Whisky exports to the world's largest whisky market. It shows that the UK government is making significant progress towards achieving its growth mission, and the Scotch Whisky industry looks forward to working with the UK and Indian governments in the months ahead to implement the deal".

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

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. At a time when Donald Trump is fuelling global instability through protectionism, international co-operation is more important than ever. A UK-India trade deal is a positive step, and we look forward to seeing the detail of the deal. Parliament must be able to scrutinise the details carefully, especially the proposed changes to national insurance contributions. When Labour was in opposition, it agreed with the Liberal Democrats that there should be a vote on trade deals. Both my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) and I have made the Lib Dem position clear: there should be proper scrutiny and a vote on a trade deal.

The Government's own export Minister, the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), said that the current ratification process is "not fit for purpose", and he is right. Does the Minister of State agree that denying a vote not only contradicts Labour party policy, but sets a dangerous precedent, especially ahead of any future US deal? Can he explain the Government's massive U-turn since entering government? Finally, will the Government push for a new UK-EU customs union—the fastest way to boost our economy—at this month's political summit?

Mr Alexander: The hon. Gentleman has referred to our attempt to reset our trading relationship with Europe. The red lines that were set out in our manifesto are very clear, but within those red lines we are endeavouring to broaden and deepen an important trading relationship that represents about 46% of the UK's trade. As for the hon. Gentleman's broader observation that the agreement we have reached today is, as it were, a pretty bright-shining light in what is a somewhat dark sky for international trade, I agree with him. It is, hopefully, a sign of further

deals to come and of a commitment to taking forward deals that are mutually beneficial, in this case for the Indians and also for the United Kingdom.

When it comes to the wider question of how the deal will be scrutinised, the hon. Gentleman is right to recognise that today's telephone conversation with Prime Minister Modi was just the start of the process. A press release has been published, along with a list of the top benefits, but we hope to publish a paper today setting out in more detail what has been agreed—the conclusion summary paper—and there will then be a process moving towards signature and a legal scrub of the text. However, as the Prime Minister made clear a few days ago, we will follow the process set out in the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): Last week I had the pleasure of meeting representatives of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry when they came here with my old friend Piyush Goyal. I congratulate the Minister and his officials, as well as FICCI and the India Global Forum—under the leadership of Manoj Ladwa—and, indeed, everyone who has spent so many years laying the groundwork for this agreement.

The Minister recognised the doubling of India's service and IT exports over the last decade and the benefits that we can gain from engagement and co-operation in respect of the service and knowledge economy, but I think it important for him to outline further what the benefits of the double contribution convention on national insurance will be, and how they will facilitate that engagement and co-operation for our workers in India.

Mr Alexander: I thank my hon. Friend for his generous words of congratulation. I know that the bilateral relationship between the United Kingdom and India has been a constant feature of his long service in the House, and a particular focus of his parliamentary work. He is right to recognise, in the context of both digital services and the services sector more widely, the huge potential mutual benefits for the United Kingdom and for India working together, and he is right to recognise the broad and deep relationship between our two countries—as I have said, 1.9 million people with Indian heritage live in the United Kingdom—but, as his question suggested, it is also right to recognise quite how dynamic the Indian economy is today. It has the highest growth rate in the G20, which is expected to remain above 6% over at least the next five years. Given that ours is a largely services-based economy, notwithstanding our excellence in advanced manufacturing, the opportunities for UK service exporters are huge and growing.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I welcome the Indian trade deal, but will the Minister now switch his attention to the other side of the Atlantic, and ask Lord Mandelson to explain to the United States Administration that tariffs on films are unworkable and impossible to implement, and would do real damage to the film industry not just in the UK but in the United States?

Mr Alexander: I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman's long-standing interest in matters relating to culture, media and sport and to the creative industries more generally. We are grateful for the expertise and experience that he brings to the House on these issues.

[*Mr Douglas Alexander*]

It would be one of the first occasions on which I told Lord Mandelson to do anything in many decades of our working together, but I will ensure that that is duly registered, not only in the record of this House but directly to our distinguished ambassador in Washington. It should also be placed on record that the film sector is a key part of the UK's world-class creative industries—and we are absolutely committed to ensuring that those sectors continue to thrive and create good jobs—and that the UK has a strong and balanced trading relationship with the United States, worth £315 billion.

I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his challenge to me to reach out directly to Lord Mandelson in respect of what we have read in the newspapers in the last couple of days, and I give him my word that I will ensure that Lord Mandelson is fully aware of the issue.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Amid much fanfare as usual, the former Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, announced that he would have a UK-India trade deal signed “by Diwali”—but very cunningly, he never mentioned which Diwali, so we were left waiting for years. Other Conservative Prime Ministers made similarly empty promises, which is why I particularly commend the Minister, the Business and Trade Secretary, their officials and the Labour Government for having finally concluded this free trade agreement. I look forward to this mutually beneficial agreement being formally signed. Can the Minister confirm that this landmark UK-India FTA will increase bilateral trade by £26 billion, increase UK GDP by £4.8 billion, boost wages by £2 billion year in, year out, and lead to many jobs in my Slough constituency and for people across both nations?

Mr Alexander: My hon. Friend seems to know my brief better than I do. In all seriousness, it is right to place on record our gratitude to the Prime Minister for his sterling work in getting this deal over the line. I also pay generous tribute to the Business and Trade Secretary, who has done an immense amount of work and whose visit to India in February with Minister Goyal unlocked a number of key issues that had proved to be sticking points for the previous Administration, and to officials at the Department for Business and Trade—both in London and, indeed, in India—who have worked tirelessly to secure this deal.

On its economic significance, I concur with the point that India is a huge and dynamic economy, but it is also right to recognise that we signed the right deal for the United Kingdom. This is the best deal that India has ever agreed to. It is expected to increase bilateral trade by about £25.5 billion and raise UK GDP, but we have managed to secure a deal more timeously than was anticipated and, frankly, we got a better deal than many expected.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): The Indian Government have said that this deal will mean that “immense opportunities for talented and skilled Indian youth will open up in the UK.”

Will the Minister please confirm that we have not signed a youth mobility scheme with India before his Government have agreed to one with the EU? He said that we have contribution agreements with the EU and

the USA, but my understanding is that we have signed double contribution conventions with only Chile, Japan and South Korea. Could he please clarify that?

Mr Alexander: What I said was that we have social security agreements with a range of countries, including the USA and with the EU. The hon. Lady asks whether a new points-based system is being introduced, and I can assure her that that is not the case. The deal covers only business mobility, and the UK has not given away visas or created new routes. Existing business mobility routes have been expanded for highly skilled and experienced professionals to cover additional sectors, but to qualify for these routes professionals must demonstrate that they meet the strict criteria for professional experience and qualifications.

Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that by securing the best deal that India has ever agreed, the Government have put UK businesses in an incredible position to take advantage of the rapidly growing economy?

Mr Alexander: India is quite simply the fastest growing economy in the G20, and is expected to be the third largest economy in the world by 2028. If we were choosing countries that we would wish to do deals with, India would be pretty high up the list. By 2030, India will be home to an estimated 60 million middle-class consumers, whose numbers are projected to grow to a quarter of a billion by 2050, and the demand for imports is on course to top £1.4 trillion by 2035.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): For those of us who have Scotch whisky industry interests in our constituency, it is very welcome news that apparently globalisation is not dead after all. The Minister speaks about this being a deal that opens doors, but what assistance will be given to British companies, especially SMEs, to ensure that they are able to maximise the benefits they can derive from trading in this very important market?

Mr Alexander: As my statement sought to make clear, there will be specific provision for SMEs as part of this deal, because we recognise that the huge Indian market can often be a challenge for businesses that do not have the capabilities of larger businesses.

I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his generous words about the Scotch whisky industry. From the quotes that we are receiving this afternoon from Diageo, Chivas and the Scotch Whisky Association, he is very much on all fours with the industry in recognising that this is a quite extraordinary deal for Scotch whisky.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister on securing the UK's largest trade deal with the G20's fastest growing economy. The Indian high commission recently appointed Newcastle's very first honorary consul general, and we will have much to discuss when we meet, because there is so much in this deal to look at and scrutinise. I thank the Minister for specifically mentioning advanced manufacturing in the north-east as well as small and medium-sized businesses everywhere. Could he say a little more about how small businesses in the north-east

can secure and access the opportunities brought forward by this deal? I am thinking particularly of our fantastic digital sector and our great health sector.

Mr Alexander: For both the digital sector and the healthcare sector, the deal offers significant opportunities in a huge and expanding market in India. It will deliver a degree of certainty as well as significant tariff reductions across a range of sectors, and it also affords us the opportunity to think long-term. We want to support the advanced manufacturers with which my hon. Friend is very familiar in the north-east of England to be able to make strategic investments in exporting to the Indian market. They will be investing in exporting not just to a large but to a growing market, and one that holds significant commercial opportunities for the decades ahead.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Just a few weeks ago, the Business and Trade Secretary said that he would

“stand up for British workers”,

so it is quite astonishing that the Minister has come to the House today to announce tax breaks for immigration. This will undercut workers in Scotland and across the UK, and it comes just weeks after Labour introduced its own tax on UK workers. It leaves us all wondering: do this Labour Government ever back British workers?

Mr Alexander: Let me name some Scottish workers who are absolutely delighted by today’s announcement. Let me quote directly what Chivas has said:

“The announcement of a free trade agreement in principle between the UK and India is a welcome boost for Chivas Brothers during an uncertain global economic environment. India is the world’s biggest whisky market by volume and greater access will be a game changer for the export of our Scotch whisky brands, such as Chivas Regal and Ballantine’s.”

Whether it is Chivas Regal, Ballantine’s or other Scottish brands, which are the product of a huge number of workers in Scotland, there is much to celebrate today.

Gurinder Singh Josan (Smethwick) (Lab): I welcome the Minister’s statement and I congratulate him, this Labour Government and officials on negotiating the trade deal, particularly given the Conservative party’s abject failure in this regard. When it comes to our business communities in the UK, we have strong values in relation to workers’ rights, human rights, consumer protections and environmental sustainability, so can the Minister outline how this deal will respect and enhance those values?

Mr Alexander: I can indeed. I said that this is a modern, forward-looking agreement, and that is why there is a recognition in the deal of exactly the values my hon. Friend mentions. That represents a first for India in many cases, it reflects the fact that we were determined to secure that as part of the negotiations, and it is one of the many reasons we are proud of the agreement announced today.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): Today’s trade deal announcement will be welcomed by many in Scotland, not least those in the whisky industry. In the face of volatile US tariffs, this is undoubtedly good news. However, there has been increasing pressure in the UK—even

from the former Prime Minister Tony Blair—for the Government to abandon their net zero ambitions. I understand that carbon mechanisms were crucial in these trade negotiations with India. Given that the SNP Government have today reaffirmed their fullest commitment to net zero and sustainable industries, can the Minister give his reassurance that the UK Government’s climate ambitions have not been sacrificed to secure this deal?

Mr Alexander: I can give the House that assurance. I thought we were going to have an uncharacteristically warm endorsement from the hon. Gentleman until he got to the word “however”. I have to say, we have been so busy negotiating a trade deal with India that we have not had the chance to read the First Minister’s “Programme for Government” today. In the spirit of generosity, he pays tribute to the work that has been done on whisky, and I will read out the statement by Debra Crew, the Diageo chief executive, who said:

“The UK-India Free Trade Agreement is a huge achievement by Prime Ministers Modi and Starmer and Ministers Goyal and Reynolds, and all of us at Diageo toast their success. It will be transformational for Scotch and Scotland, while powering jobs and investment in both India and the UK.”

I could not have put it better myself.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): As has already been said, negotiating a trade deal on beneficial terms is hugely significant, particularly with regard to the recent trade war initiated by Trump. However, I have come to this House countless times to raise the issue of human rights violations and abuses against the Kashmiris by the Indian Government, and I will do so again today. Can the Minister tell me whether the persecution of Kashmiri journalists and human rights activists has been raised at any point during these negotiations, and whether he will return to this House, before he signs on the dotted line in a few months, with a full response detailing exactly how the UK Government are upholding their international human rights obligations, and not undermining efforts to defend Kashmiri human rights?

Mr Alexander: The United Kingdom is a leading advocate for human rights around the world, and we remain committed to the promotion of universal human rights. When we have concerns, they are raised directly with partner Governments, including at ministerial level. The horrific recent terrorist attack in Jammu and Kashmir was utterly devastating, and my thoughts remain with the victims, their loved ones and the people of India. It is, however, for India and Pakistan to find a lasting solution and resolution to the Kashmir dispute, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Today’s news of a free trade agreement between the United Kingdom and India is wonderful—some of us have argued for greater free trade arrangements with Commonwealth countries for many years. Mr Modi, the Prime Minister of India, should be commended for adopting a free-market system that has brought wealth and prosperity to India, eliminating poverty and enabling India to work with countries like the United Kingdom. Will the Minister accept that none of this would have been possible had we not been sovereign and able to negotiate our own free trade agreements following our departure from the European Union? Was Brexit not the right thing to do?

Mr Alexander: First, it is right to recognise that the hon. Gentleman has form on arguing for the importance of the Commonwealth; I seem to recollect answering parliamentary questions in recent weeks on exactly the opportunity for doing effective economic work together that is provided by the Commonwealth and the fellowship of friendship that it presents us. On that, we are on all fours, and I certainly agree that we should look to strengthen and broaden our trading ties where we can. His point about Europe is a well-ploughed field in this House and elsewhere, and it seems to me that we should be looking forward and looking for new markets rather than engaging in old arguments.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): I warmly welcome today's important announcement, and in particular the benefits it will bring to the UK economy, with the billions of pounds of extra growth it will generate in both the food and drink and advanced manufacturing sectors, as well as in many other parts of our economy. Will the Minister elaborate a little on the benefits to the UK tech sector, and in particular to start-ups, such as the many in my constituency, and to the young entrepreneurs setting up their own small businesses?

Mr Alexander: Given the significant progress we have made on goods, it is right to recognise that there are also huge opportunities on services. I pay tribute to the tech sector in the United Kingdom and to the extraordinary work that is being done not just in my hon. Friend's constituency, but more broadly. The City of London, I am glad to say, has become a significant global tech hub, not least for fintech. Chris Hayward, policy chairman of the City of London Corporation, said today that

"India is a key strategic partner, and this deal reflects our shared ambition to deepen trade ties, boost investment, and build lasting collaboration."

Whether in technology, fintech or financial services, there are huge opportunities as a result of this deal.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): Steel tariffs were reportedly a major sticking point in these trade negotiations with India. That is of particular concern to communities across south Wales, especially following Tata's decision to shut down its blast furnaces in Wales and across Europe while simultaneously investing in new capacity in India. Can the Minister assure the House that British steelworkers have not been sacrificed in order to secure this deal, and can he confirm what tariff rate Indian steel imports will face when the agreement comes into effect?

Mr Alexander: It was this Government who recently stepped in to save British Steel in order to save thousands of jobs and avoid a sudden collapse in our primary steelmaking capacity. Thanks to this Government's swift intervention, we were able to secure the raw materials that kept the blast furnaces at Scunthorpe alight. British Steel has also cancelled the redundancy consultation that would otherwise have put 2,700 jobs at risk. Frankly, UK industry depends on the UK steel industry and thanks to our plan for change, demand is set to increase, as we build the 1.5 million homes, the railways, the schools and the hospitals that we need to usher in a decade of national renewal. That is the context in which we have taken forward today's announcement.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): I welcome the conclusion of negotiations on what is the best deal that India has offered any country when it comes to free trade. Many of my constituents are part of the living bridge of 1.9 million people of Indian heritage living in and contributing to this country. Can the Minister, at a time of global volatility, set out how Labour's free trade deal gives the world-renowned clothing and food businesses in Southall the confidence to grow and expand, thereby boosting our local economy?

Mr Alexander: It is right to recognise that both producers and consumers stand to benefit in relation not just to whisky, but on a range of consumer goods. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's constituents in Southall and the extraordinary contribution that they have made as part of that living bridge over many decades here in the United Kingdom. The commercial opportunities in both directions are significant, which is why, I think, we were able to secure the deal today.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I welcome this trade deal with a global titan that will be in place for the decades ahead. It has been made possible by Brexit and by the hard work of the previous Government. However, the Minister will be aware that this country runs a very substantial trade deficit with India. Is the deal that he has negotiated likely to narrow or widen that deficit, because all we know about the tariffs, non-tariff trade barriers and trade-offs that are implicit in the deal is what we read about in the press or are told about by the Indian Government?

Mr Alexander: It is for the Indian Government to account for this trade deal in the terms that they so choose. We will follow the established constitutional process of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 whereby not only are we sharing a statement with the House at the earliest opportunity, but the House will have the opportunity to scrutinise the details of every aspect of this agreement.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): As somebody who represents a constituency with a proud community of people of Indian heritage, with world-beating firms, a skilled workforce, and a catapult centre at the Manufacturing Technology Centre, I would like to ask the Minister to expand on how this deal will help deliver growth, economic development and innovation right across the country, and opportunities for businesses, small medium and large?

Mr Alexander: We have spoken today of the importance of the Indian market, but it is also right to recognise that the Indian market presently sits behind some of the world's highest barriers to trade, notwithstanding the fact that it was the UK's 12th largest trading partner. The fact that we are tearing down so many of those tariff levels as part of this agreement will be a very practical and pragmatic offering for the kind of excellence in manufacturing that he has in his constituency and that is represented across our country.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): How can the Government make a trade deal for the whole of the United Kingdom if they do not control the trade laws for the whole of the United Kingdom? Northern Ireland is still under the control of EU trade laws. To give a

practical illustration of the problem, under the UK-India trade deal any imports to Northern Ireland from India—I speak of imports, not exports—will be subject not to any agreed UK tariff but to whatever prevailing EU tariff there is on those goods, and the EU does not have a trade deal with India. Is this not another illustration of how Northern Ireland has been left behind by a protocol that has left us still in the EU?

Mr Alexander: The Northern Ireland's trading relationships and its status within the United Kingdom are not altered as a consequence of the Indian free trade agreement that was reached today. The established position is exactly as the right hon. Member describes and recognises the distinctive history and significance of the Good Friday agreement—not just in the protocol but the Windsor framework. A huge amount of work has been put in by both sides of the House to try to maintain a hard-won peace in Northern Ireland, and that is not compromised by today's agreement.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): As other Scottish MPs have mentioned, this deal is good news for the whisky industry. It means, “Uisge beatha gu leòr”—whisky galore. It is also good for food producers, such as crofters in the Western Isles, whose exports of lamb products now face zero tariffs, and the salmon farming industry, which supports 420 jobs in my constituency and accounts for £187 million of trade. It is good news overall. I guess the only question is whether the Minister will be toasting this deal with a single malt Hearach from the Isle of Harris Distillery or one from Uist, Benbecula or Barra—a chain of new distilleries that now have a new export market thanks to this deal.

Mr Alexander: I think it was Tip O'Neill, former Speaker of the House of Representatives, who said “All politics is local”, so if I am going to be toasting tonight's deal, it will be with the finest Glenkinchie whisky from the East Lothian part of Scotland, not, alas, with an Islay malt or a malt from the outer isles. I pay generous tribute to my hon. Friend, who is a doughty, tireless and fearless defender of the interests of not just the Harris tweed industry or whisky producers but Scottish salmon farmers, who are a significant contributor to UK exports, never mind Scottish exports. In sector after sector of the Scottish economy, there will be significant material benefits as a consequence of this deal. We promised that we would have a Labour Government delivering for Scotland. Today we are seeing what that promise looks like delivered.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): The Minister just admitted that this agreement means the expansion of some visa schemes. The Indian Government say that the agreement “eases mobility for professionals” such as intra-corporate transferees and their dependants and independent professionals like chefs. It also says that the new double contribution convention creates a three-year exemption from national insurance contributions for Indians working here. Can the Minister confirm that this agreement will make Indian migrant workers in Britain cheaper to employ, relative to British workers, than they are today—yes or no?

Mr Alexander: The points-based immigration system is not affected. The UK has not given away visas or created new routes as part of this deal. It is existing

business mobility routes that have been expanded for highly skilled and experienced professionals to cover additional sectors.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister on securing this vital trade deal. The automotive sector in the west midlands has been worried about increasing tariffs in the US, so a trade deal with India—a country where UK brands are highly respected—is extremely welcome. Can the Minister tell my constituents in Halesowen who work in the automotive sector how this deal will benefit them?

Mr Alexander: I hope I can give my hon. Friend exactly that assurance, and I am conscious that there was an additional point I should have made earlier in relation to steel. As part of this agreement, we have included a bilateral safeguard mechanism, which allows us to temporarily suspend or increase tariffs if an industry is suffering or there is a threat of serious injury as a result of reduced duties.

To my hon. Friend's question, automotive companies will now benefit from selling to India with tariffs under a quota reduced from over 100% to 10%. We have agreed quotas to limit the volume of duty-free imports permitted to enter our markets. That will open opportunities for the sector, giving them a competitive edge in the Indian market and increased access to India's rapidly growing middle class. As the sector transitions to electric vehicles, so will the market access we have secured as part of this deal. It will give British businesses the opportunity to scale up their exports as production ramps up. Both the UK and India have growing EV markets and production, so we want to protect these industries while ensure that consumers have choice.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement. He will be aware of the tremendous filming potential in Northern Ireland, and of the increasing number of Hollywood films shot there. The Northern Ireland film and TV industry has made a significant contribution to the regional economy, boosting it by some £330 million since 2018, and 4,000 jobs are tied to it. It is essential that we outline the importance of trade deals to the regions, and the film sector must be part of that. Solutions must be found to enable global film makers to film in picturesque, skilled, cost-efficient Northern Ireland.

Mr Alexander: Picturesque and skilled—I cannot remember the other word that the hon. Member used, but I agreed with every one of them. As I recollect, significant parts of “The Crown” were filmed in Northern Ireland. There is a huge and burgeoning economic opportunity for the film industry in Northern Ireland; as he rightly recognised, that is a tribute not solely to Northern Ireland's extraordinary scenery, but to the extraordinary skills and capabilities of its workforce. The film sector is and will remain a key part of our creative industries, which employ millions of people, not just in Northern Ireland but across the whole UK. On his point about the US, I assure him that officials and Ministers are in regular communication with our US counterparts. I will not get into the detail of those discussions, but the point he made has been well taken.

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): May I add my congratulations to the Minister and everybody involved in getting this significant trade deal with what will soon be the biggest economy in the world over the line? In Welwyn Hatfield, we have a vibrant Indian diaspora, including my friend Councillor Pankit Shah, who, just over 20 years after moving to the UK, became our first ever British-Indian mayor of Welwyn Hatfield. He has served with distinction. Our close connection is principally due to the University of Hertfordshire in Hatfield, where thousands of students from India have studied, and continue to do so. Does my right hon. Friend agree that while today is a fantastic moment for trade, it is vital that we continue to have visa schemes that encourage Indian students to come and study in our country?

Mr Alexander: Let me echo my hon. Friend's generous tribute to Councillor Pankit Shah, and many like him who have made an immense contribution to the United Kingdom, making us what we are today. That reflects the human bridge formed by 1.9 million people, and the human dynamic here, and students play a significant, valued role in that.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): AG Barr, which has iconic brands such as Irn-Bru and Rubicon, is based in my Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch constituency. What will the trade deal mean for soft drinks companies such as Barr?

Mr Alexander: I hesitate to say, "What's it called? Cumbernauld!" Whether for Scottish salmon, Scottish whisky or perhaps the most iconic Scottish product of all, Irn-Bru, this India-UK trade deal is good news. When I was being briefed by officials shortly before coming to the House, I asked for examples of the sectors in which we would see the biggest benefits, and my hon. Friend will be delighted to hear that Irn-Bru featured prominently in the description given.

Middle East Update

5.34 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on the middle east. Yesterday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that the Israeli Security Cabinet has approved a plan to expand and intensify Israel's military operations in Gaza. He said that the Israel Defence Forces operations will extend across more of Gaza. Tactics will no longer involve short raids, with the implication that Israel will hold the ground it takes. Reports suggest that the plans could include full military occupation of the Gaza strip. Prime Minister Netanyahu said that Gaza's population will be moved "for its protection". Tens of thousands of reservists are being called up. In parallel, the Security Cabinet reportedly approved a plan to deliver aid through private companies.

This comes at a time when the scale of civilian suffering and humanitarian need is already intolerable. More than 52,000 people have now been killed in Gaza. Israel has fully blocked the entry of humanitarian aid for over two months. The World Food Programme says its food stockpile has been exhausted. The announcements from the Israeli Government have rightly sparked grave concern that this conflict, which has already wrought so much bloodshed and suffering, may enter a dangerous new phase. I know that concern will be felt right across the House.

Let me make the Government position crystal clear: we strongly oppose the expansion of Israel's operations. Any attempt to annex land in Gaza would be unacceptable. Palestinian territory must not be reduced or subjected to any demographic change. We want this war to end. We want an immediate ceasefire, the release of all hostages, the urgent provision of humanitarian aid and a pathway to a political solution.

We all recognise that Hamas continue to hold hostages in the cruellest fashion. Their actions show their complete disregard for the interests of the Palestinian people. Hamas must not divert aid for their own financial gain or use civilian infrastructure for military purposes. We repeat our demand for the immediate release of the hostages, but an expansion of this conflict is not the route to achieve their safe return. That is why it is so strongly opposed by so many hostages' families. Negotiations offer the best hope of ending the agony of those waiting for loved ones who are held captive, alleviating the suffering of civilians, and ending Hamas's control of Gaza. It is evident that Hamas cannot be defeated through military means alone. An expansion of military operations will result in the deaths of more innocent civilians and put the hostages at yet greater risk. The fighting must stop.

The Government have said since day one in office that the only way to ensure a path towards long-term peace and stability is an immediate ceasefire, the release of hostages, better protection of civilians and significantly more aid entering Gaza. Diplomacy is how we ensure security for Israelis and Palestinians, not more bloodshed. All the people of this region deserve to live in peace, prosperity and security. We urge all parties urgently to return to talks, implement the

ceasefire agreement in full and work towards a permanent peace. We continue to use our full diplomatic weight to bring about a ceasefire and end the suffering.

After more than two months of aid into Gaza being blocked, Palestinians continue to face immense suffering. Essential supplies of food and medicine are either no longer available or quickly running out. As the United Nations has already said, it is hard to see how, if implemented, the new Israeli plan to deliver aid through private companies would be consistent with humanitarian principles and meet the scale of the need. We need urgent clarity from the Israeli Government on their intentions.

We must remember what is at stake. These humanitarian principles matter for every conflict around the world. They should be applied consistently in every war zone. As we have said repeatedly, humanitarian aid must never be used as a political tool, and Israel is bound under international law to allow the unhindered passage of humanitarian aid. I repeat my call for Israel to engage with partners to allow for a rapid and unhindered resurgence in the flow of aid into Gaza.

We reiterate our outrage at recent strikes by Israeli forces on humanitarian workers, infrastructure and healthcare facilities. Israel must do far more to protect the civilian population and humanitarian workers, and hold to account those who are responsible. Over a year since the appalling attack on the World Central Kitchen, in which three British nationals were tragically killed, we continue to press for a conclusion to the Israeli investigation and a decision as to whether criminal proceedings will be brought. The UN and humanitarian partners must be able to carry out their work in safety, in accordance with their principles.

Last week, we welcomed Prime Minister Mustafa of the Palestinian Authority to the United Kingdom. We signed a landmark memorandum of understanding and confirmed a £101 million package of support for the Occupied Palestinian Territories. We will continue to support the Palestinian Authority as the only legitimate governing entity in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including in Gaza. During that visit, we reaffirmed the UK's commitment to recognising a Palestinian state as a contribution to a two-state solution. Only a political horizon of moving towards a two-state solution can ensure the long-term peace and security of both Palestinians and Israelis. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Foreign Minister, Dame Priti Patel.

5.41 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Today is day 578 since the atrocities of 7 October and the capture of the hostages. Fifty-nine innocent hostages continue to be held in cruel captivity by Hamas, and those who are still alive have no access to aid or communication with their family. Does the Minister agree that Iran and Hamas are to blame for events since 7 October, and that the immediate return of hostages would aid efforts to secure the ceasefire? What discussions has the Foreign Secretary had in recent days with the US, and with middle eastern and other partners who have brokered previous agreements on efforts to secure the release of the hostages? What exactly is Britain contributing to these efforts? Is the UK's convening power being used effectively, and what

international pressure is the UK trying to bring to bear on Hamas to release the hostages and to ensure their removal from power?

The Minister stated that Hamas cannot be defeated through military means. On what basis has he reached that assertion, and what is his alternative to get Hamas to lay down their arms? On aid, he mentioned the Israeli Government's fears about aid diversion. If the current situation on aid access is to be unblocked, the Government must seriously engage with Israel to address the many concerns, and the broader situation, that have led to the breakdown of the ceasefire. How much UK-funded aid is waiting to enter Gaza, where is it being held, and what is the Minister doing to engage with his Israeli counterparts, so as to find practical solutions to this issue? What engagement has taken place between the Foreign Secretary and his Israeli counterparts on the decision of the Israeli Security Cabinet to undertake this new operation in Gaza, including on its objectives?

We all want to see a sustainable end to the conflict, the return of the hostages, the alleviation of this awful crisis and, eventually, a two-state solution, with the region free of Hamas and of threats from Iran. The Government talk about wanting to achieve these things, but clearly they need to convince us all that there is a plan for achieving them. Let us be clear: the root cause of so much bloodshed and misery in the middle east is the regime in Iran, and if this Government are serious about achieving a sustainable peace in the middle east, they must have a strategy to deter Iran and undermine its regime and its awful approach, which is to sow destruction and export repression around the world, including to the UK; we heard about that in a statement earlier. When will the Government come out with a clear strategy for dealing with this malign threat to peace and stability, both in the middle east and elsewhere? For months we have been asking questions of this Government; in fact, I asked the Minister the same question just last week. As we saw on 27 March, the Intelligence and Security Committee sent a report on Iran to the Prime Minister. How many more militants and terrorists will be bankrolled by Iran, threatening lives, before the Government have a clear strategy in place? What engagement is taking place with the US to tackle Iran's destructive influence and ensure that it never becomes a nuclear state?

While the Minister is at the Dispatch Box, can he update us on other matters in the middle east? On Sunday, the Iranian-backed Houthis recklessly fired a missile at Israel, which landed near the main terminal of Ben Gurion airport and injured six people. Let alone the risk to aviation, many more could have been injured or killed on the ground; that, no doubt, must have been the desired outcome of the Houthis. Do the Government have a plan to deal with the ongoing threats of the Houthis, including the threat they pose to stability and security and to our own interests?

On Syria, the Government announced to the media on 24 April that they were lifting 24 more sanctions, but it took six days before they informed the House through a written ministerial statement that they would be doing so. Will the Minister explain why the House was given that discourtesy and why the matter was not brought to the House earlier? We still have no clarity about the criteria being used to lift the sanctions, the entities identified or the impact. The Government are also not applying any conditions. The US is imposing conditions

[Priti Patel]

on Syria when it comes to easing sanctions, including destroying chemical weapons and co-operating on counter-terrorism.

Will the Government explain why they have taken a different route from our allies when we have consistently worked in concert with our international partners? Why are we now working in isolation and in such an unco-ordinated way? The last Conservative Government led a co-ordinated approach when it came to Syria, and this Government are now behind the curve. We have to be cautious when it comes to lifting sanctions. The situation in Syria is fragile, particularly when we saw the appalling clashes between the pro-Government and Druze communities. Are the Government pressing Hayat Tahrir al-Sham into action?

Finally, will the Minister update the House on the situation in Lebanon? What is his assessment of the current situation, including the adherence to the ceasefire, the terms of UN Security Council resolution 1701 and the broader political stability?

Mr Falconer: I thank the right hon. Lady for her important questions. I take the opportunity to respond to her important questions about the attack on Ben Gurion airport. I absolutely condemn the Houthis' continued missile attacks, including the attack on Ben Gurion airport over the weekend. Israel has extensive experience of the dangers of civil aviation attacks of this kind, and we reiterate our support for its right to self-defence in the face of Houthi attacks. The House heard from the Defence Secretary last week some of the efforts we are taking in the collective self-defence of our allies in the Red sea.

The right hon. Lady raised a number of other important points. I can update the House that we are in regular contact with those pressing for a ceasefire in the region—most obviously, of course, the President of the United States' special envoy, Mr Witkoff, who I believe is in the region now. Of course, the Foreign Secretary has been in touch with his counterpart in Israel, as well as with many others. He has been in Oman and Qatar recently, and as the right hon. Lady would expect, I have been in regular contact with all those with an interest.

The right hon. Lady asks for an update on sanctions. I was not aware of any discourtesy in the sequence of how we announced the Syria sanctions, but I am happy to take that point away. If there was any discourtesy, I can assure her that it was accidental. We took the steps that we did in relation to sanctions because we want the new Syrian Government to succeed. Britain's interests—indeed, Israel's interests—are in a stable and secure Syria. The new Syrian Government have taken welcome steps. As the right hon. Lady points out, there are still areas of major concern, but the judgment that I took alongside the Foreign Secretary was that we should lift sanctions that clearly no longer targeted entities controlled by the Assad regime—given that it is clearly no longer in power in Syria—and maintain sanctions where assets held by the Assad family were still relevant. We took a series of principled steps to try to ensure that the new Syria has the best possible chance of being the success that would be in Britain's national interest. We maintained those sanctions on the Assad family, and we did so in close co-operation with our allies.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I agree with the Minister's comments and condemnation of Israel's actions in Gaza. The problem is that I have agreed with him every time he has made these condemnations of Israel, and the whole House generally has joined him in that, but the reality is that Israel is taking absolutely no notice of the Government's position. Its actions now in Gaza—the starving of the population and the threats of wholesale movement of that population away—are completely unacceptable. Will the Minister consider a rapid recognition of a Palestinian state, hopefully together with France and other allies, and will he seriously consider sanctions against Israel if it pursues the wholesale removal of Palestinians from their homes?

Mr Falconer: I know the strength of feeling of my hon. Friend and of so many Members on the Benches behind me and, indeed, across the House. It is obviously a source of great anguish to me and all in the Government that we continue, this far into our government, to not have the ceasefire in place that we have long called for. We are working with our allies to try to persuade Israel to change course. As he will know, I will not comment on sanctions from the Dispatch Box, but we have been as clear as we can on our position in relation to the many areas we have discussed in the House week after week, month after month where there has been a failure to see improvement, whether that is the protection of civilians or aid into Gaza. We will, of course, continue to discuss all other matters in relation to this fraught and tragic situation with our close partners, as he would expect.

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

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): The Israeli Government's decision to approve plans for an expanded offensive, summarised by officials as the "conquest" of Gaza, is disgraceful. It will wreak more devastation and displacement on Palestinians after months of bombardment. It will also narrow the path back to a ceasefire, while severely harming the chances of getting the remaining hostages in Hamas's captivity back to Israel alive. Does the Minister agree that if the Israeli Government carried out their threat to seize and hold Gaza, that would constitute a further flagrant breach of international law? In that instance, what would this Government's response be?

The latest aid blockade of Gaza has now lasted for more than 60 days. The UN has described it as a "growing humanitarian catastrophe". Prime Minister Netanyahu's latest proposal to deliver aid through private companies at military hubs appears to contravene basic principles of international humanitarian law, including the neutrality of aid, and has been criticised by aid organisations as dangerous and unworkable.

The Israeli Government's refusal to reopen aid routes is utterly unacceptable and contravenes their obligations as an occupying power. We welcomed the Government's pledge of a £101 million package of support for the Occupied Palestinian Territories. However, without more action to secure the reopening of aid pathways, this new package will provide limited relief for Palestinians suffering in the strip. Can the Minister provide details on how the Government are working with international partners to pressure the Israeli Government to allow their aid to

reach Gaza? Can he update the House on whether contingency measures are being considered to ensure that aid reaches those suffering in Gaza, even if the Israeli Government continue to block the direct supply of aid into the strip?

Mr Falconer: The hon. Lady asks a series of important questions. I sought in my statement to focus very clearly on what has been announced by the Israeli Government, including by Prime Minister Netanyahu on Sunday. I do not wish to be drawn into speculation about the various reports of how this operation may be conducted; I wish to stick only to the public announcements.

We have been clear all the way along in our commitment to a ceasefire and our desire to return to the framework of the ceasefire that was negotiated with such relief. We are in regular touch with Special Envoy Witkoff. We hope that through his efforts, he will be able to secure a return to a ceasefire. That would be far preferable on all the axes that the hon. Lady describes, whether that is the safe return of hostages, the desperate need for humanitarian aid to return to Gaza or, in our view, Israel's security. She asks important questions about the role of an occupying power in the provision of aid. My officials set out our view on the legal position on Friday at the International Court of Justice.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The Israeli Government's plan to expand their military operation in Gaza and displace its population speaks volumes about the effects of their impunity—impunity to break international law, to cut off food and medical supplies, to starve a population and to kill tens of thousands of civilians. What will the Minister do to end the impunity with which Israel is acting? When will he finally sanction those Israeli Ministers, apply a full arms embargo, ban all settlement goods and, most importantly, recognise Palestine?

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for her important questions. I have set out at the Dispatch Box the steps we have taken, whether it is in relation to sanctions, arms or goods, and I will not rehearse them here; I can see that many Members want to contribute. As she would expect, I will not comment on further sanctions.

My hon. Friend asks the question that I know is on the lips of so many in this House, about recognition. What we see in Gaza and the announcements over the weekend are a very significant, immediate and practical threat to the viability of Palestinian life, and we are taking every practical step we can, alongside our allies, to try to focus on the ceasefire. That must be our most immediate priority, given the threats that hang over such a significant civilian population as we speak.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): In his statement, the Minister said that the UK Government “reaffirmed the UK's commitment to recognising a Palestinian state”.

Up to now, the excuse has been that we have to wait until negotiations are complete. There are no negotiations—all we have is extremist settlers trying to force out Palestinian people from their villages in the west bank, which I have seen with my own eyes. In the name of God, why can we not give the Palestinian

people some hope? Why can we not give them the same right to self-determination and recognise a Palestinian state now?

Mr Falconer: I thank the right hon. Gentleman and my constituency neighbour for his commitment to these issues. The problems the Palestinian people face at this moment are acute, immediate and practical. As I have set out, we stand by our commitments. We want to make a contribution to practically improving the lives of the Palestinian people, and we will view recognition in that light.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): No one can deny any longer that Israel is committing war crime after war crime, with over 50,000 Palestinians killed, millions forcibly displaced, the complete blockade of Gaza for the last two months and now plans to annex the entirety of the Gaza strip. Just what will it take for the Government to properly act over Netanyahu's breaking of every single international norm and rule? I say to the Minister that simply opposing the expansion of military operations from the Dispatch Box is not securing peace or helping the Palestinian people. The Government have rightly imposed widespread sanctions on Russia. Why do they refuse to impose widespread sanctions on Israel?

Mr Falconer: I recognise the passion in my hon. Friend's voice, and as he knows, it is not just at this Dispatch Box that we have set out our views. He asks for widespread sanctions. Of course, as the House knows, we have imposed sanctions on violent settlers, and we have suspended arms licences, according to a careful process and having looked at the risks to international humanitarian law. We will continue to take action across the full range of our diplomatic options, and not just at this Dispatch Box, as he would expect.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): What dialogue is ongoing with Egypt at this time? There are concerns about the pressure on Egypt, not just from the situation in Gaza and its obvious interest in the Rafah crossing, but in the south from the conflict in Sudan. Egypt remains an important party in getting to a resolution. What is the Government's current dialogue with and support for Egypt?

Mr Falconer: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his important question. Of course the conflict affects not just Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories but many of its neighbours, including Egypt. I confirm that the Government have been in regular dialogue with their Egyptian counterparts, and I have an upcoming exchange with one of my Egyptian counterparts on exactly these questions.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The people of Gaza are being starved deliberately, and they need full, immediate, unimpeded delivery of adequate aid. Will the UK Government insist that Israel ensures that aid is distributed not by private military contractors, but by the UN and international agencies, according to the UN's recognised humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, independence and impartiality?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend rightly highlights the importance of the humanitarian principles she outlines. Those are important principles not just in Israel and the

[Mr Falconer]

Occupied Palestinian Territories, but right across the world. It is a proud part of British history that we have been such forceful advocates for those principles, and we will continue to be so with Israel and any others who seek to undermine them.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): The hon. Member will forgive me, but there are few things more infuriating in this House than listening to Ministers—whether they are of the blue persuasion, or of the red persuasion, as now—fail to call out collective punishment for what it is, fail to call out war crimes for what they are, continue to justify the sale of arms to Israel, and find every excuse possible not to recognise the state of Palestine. Perhaps he will be the one who surprises me, gets to his feet, and says that the plan as laid out by Benjamin Netanyahu is tantamount to ethnic cleansing. Will he do that, yes or no?

Mr Falconer: The right hon. Gentleman, perhaps unsurprisingly, goes for rhetoric, and he wants me to opine on questions of law and make determinations that Ministers, for a long time, have rightly chosen to treat as questions for the courts. He asked me to take action. As a Government, the Labour party has taken action. It has taken action on arms, and on sanctions—we have a record that we can defend; we are not simply here for rhetoric.

Matthew Patrick (Wirral West) (Lab): Not a week goes by without more worrying news coming out of the middle east, and my thoughts are with the innocent people in Gaza who are worried about a new offensive, with the hostage families who are worried about their loved ones, and with Israel following the Houthi attack. Will the Minister join me in condemning the Houthi attack, and in calling for negotiations to continue that will see aid get into Gaza and hostages returned home?

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for his question—I know of his long personal commitment to those so badly affected by this conflict. I join him in condemnation of the Houthi attack. The House should be under no illusions about the nature of the Houthis. They are no friend to the Palestinians, and their repeated strikes against international shipping—indeed, against practically any flagged vessel that crosses through the Red sea—are a threat to global peace and security, and to international trade. Their actions targeting civilian aviation do nothing for the Palestinian people.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): After 18 months of the diplomacy that the Minister referred to, it is clear that Israel has not significantly complied once. After watching children being shot in the streets, medics and hospitals consistently targeted, British citizens and rescue workers murdered and their bodies concealed, red lines such as Rafah reduced to rubble, and the hostages still in captivity, we now learn from an Israeli Government Minister that Gaza is to be “entirely destroyed”. We are watching the livestreamed starvation of an entire people. The Minister talked about his anguish, which I know is genuine, but can he not see what the majority of the House can see, which is that he is facing a catastrophic failure of Government policy, for which the Palestinians, the Israelis and the rest of us

may well pay a heavy price for many years to come? He is an intelligent man. Can he not see the moral and tactical case for a change in strategy that might bring about peace?

Mr Falconer: The right hon. Gentleman talks powerfully, and the scenes in Gaza are visible to us all. He asks questions about tactics and strategy, and the right strategy must be over the next two weeks for Special Envoy Witkoff’s efforts to see success. We need to see a ceasefire restored. Those who are advocating for that political process need our full support, and that is where the efforts of the Government are focused.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Israeli Government Minister Smotrich said today that Gaza is to be “entirely destroyed”, and its people are to “leave in great numbers to third countries”.

That latest threat is on top of the deliberate blockage of aid into Gaza, on top of the ongoing displacement of the past 19 months, and on top of 50,000 deaths. There are clearly breaches of international humanitarian law. The Minister has been clear in his condemnation, and clear that this is not the way to bring the hostages home. If the Israeli Government are not listening to his words, and surely they are not, will he consider what meaningful action the Government can take? Will he consider further sanctions against Israeli Ministers, and against goods that are made in illegal settlements on stolen Palestinian land?

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for her important question. Clearly the rhetoric of some Israeli Government Ministers has crossed a threshold after which we would all condemn them—the Foreign Secretary has condemned a series of statements. I was not familiar with that statement, but it looks as if it would fall very much in the same category. As she would expect, I will not comment on further sanctions. As I have made clear, we have taken action and we will keep further action under review.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The Minister has made the Government’s position crystal clear that the Israeli plan is unacceptable. How will British Government policy towards Israel change as that plan is implemented?

Mr Falconer: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, we hope to avoid having to deal with that hypothetical, and we will seek to persuade the Israeli Government not to embark on a path so damaging, for all the reasons I have set out this afternoon. I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will be asking me that question in the House should we fail.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): Yet again, the unimaginable horror of what is happening in Gaza has been joined by yet more unacceptable behaviour from the Israeli Government. Let me be clear to the House: the butchers of Hamas could draw this to an end today by releasing the hostages, but that does not make right the starvation and destruction of the Palestinian people in Gaza. A dictionary definition of ethnic cleansing includes the mass expulsion of a people from their land. I ask the Minister two questions. What does he think and how does he feel when he hears Israeli Ministers say:

“We are finally going to occupy the Gaza Strip... Once we occupy...we can talk about sovereignty”?

Those of us on the Labour Benches stood on a manifesto commitment to recognise the state of Palestine. If not now, when?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend has a deep commitment to these issues; he raises them here and elsewhere often. Let me be clear: any attempt to annex land in Gaza would be unacceptable. Palestinian territory must not be reduced or subjected to any demographic change. He can read from that the strength of our views on some of the announcements made by some of those associated with the Israeli Government. We want to see a Palestinian state that can function safely, side by side with a safe Israeli state, and it is regrettable that that seems like such a distant prospect. I am sure that we will continue this discussion in the House in the weeks and months to come.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): In the light of the latest outrage from the Netanyahu Government in displacing hundreds of thousands of innocent Palestinians, which comes on top of the starvation of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, the murdering of aid workers and the expansion of violence by settlers, we get from the Minister strong opposition, a request for “urgent clarity” and a reiteration of his “outrage”. He says that he is taking action, but he can hear from all sides of the House that nobody is satisfied with the level of action that the British Government are taking. I implore him to listen to the support from all sides of the House, recognise a Palestinian state, impose a full arms embargo on Israel and sanction Smotrich and Ben-Gvir. In the name of God, as others have said, please can we get aid into Gaza so that people will stop starving?

Mr Falconer: The hon. Lady is right to press on the absolutely vital importance of aid getting into Gaza. Those are points that we make regularly and with force to the Israeli Government. Part of my anguish is about the reports that I read, as so many in the House do, of the continued failure for that to happen. I will address a point that I think she may have made, which others have also made, about whether there are alternative routes to get aid into Gaza. A range of alternative routes, other than through the land crossing, have been tried. It is the view of the British Government that no route other than a land route can get the scale of aid that is now required into Gaza. Israeli decision making is preventing those land routes from being in operation. The hon. Lady asks about the recognition of a Palestinian state, and I refer her to my previous answers.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for his statement following yet another appalling turn of events towards Gaza by the Israeli Government. In a Westminster Hall debate in February, I said I feared that

“if the occupation continues, it will become increasingly difficult to apply international law to the situation on the ground.”—[*Official Report*, 12 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 198WH.]

I now fear that if we do not recognise a Palestinian state, there will be no Palestinian state that includes Gaza left to recognise. Will the UK Government take immediate steps to recognise the state of Palestine?

Mr Falconer: We are clear about the principles of international law that apply. As I said to the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), on Friday we appeared at the International Court of Justice to set out our understanding of the obligations on an occupying power—in this case, Israel. We were clear about what international law, in our view, meant for the occupying power.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): As we have heard, the Netanyahu Cabinet has approved an illegal plan to expand its military offensive to capture and occupy all of Gaza. That will put 1 million children at acute risk of starvation, epidemic disease and death, with the deliberate blockade of food and essential supplies. Does the Minister deny that that constitutes genocide in real time? When did he last assess the real risk that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza?

Mr Falconer: As the House knows, I will not make a determination from this Dispatch Box on questions of law. We assess risk. I can confirm that those assessments are ongoing and that a prevention of humanitarian aid reaching Gaza is part of them.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): As we approach the anniversary of the ICJ advisory opinion on the occupation, what is delaying the UK Government’s response? Is it that the opinion requires not just recognition that the occupation is illegal, but the Government to set out what steps they will take to end that occupation? Will the Minister at least say from the Dispatch Box whether the Government believe that the movement of the Palestinian population of Gaza would constitute a forcible displacement?

Mr Falconer: Forcible movement of the Gazan population out of Gaza would be forcible displacement, and that is a clear concept in international law.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Israel is an important security, trade and democratic partner, but that does not give it a blank cheque. The fact is that 13,000 children have been killed and 25,000 have been injured, maimed or wounded—some of them have been orphaned. I have been in this House for 20 years, and for many years I have supported Israel—pretty much at all costs, quite frankly—but today I say that I got it wrong. I condemn Israel for what it is doing to the Palestinian people in Gaza and the west bank. I withdraw my support right now for the actions of Israel and what it is doing right now in Gaza. Of course the hostages should be released, of course Israel has a right to exist, and of course Israeli and Jewish people should have the right to live in peace, but so do the Palestinian people. I have said it before, and I will say it again: the life of a Palestinian child is as precious as the life of a Jewish child.

This is a particular moment in time. We have had lots of statements over the past 18 months. Not only is this not Parliament’s greatest hour, but I am really concerned that this is a moment in history on which people will look back and in which we have got it wrong as a country. Will the Minister stand up to our friends and allies in the United States and make a strong stand

[Mark Pritchard]

for humanity, for us to be on the right side of history and for having the moral courage to lead, not just to follow the United States, and to make a difference? That is why we are all elected here. Let us stand up for life. Let us stand up for all children, not just Jewish children.

Mr Falconer: That was a very powerful intervention. I will not linger long in the answer, other than to say that I hear the right hon. Gentleman's words and feel their force. I will of course endeavour to stand up on the international stage and here at this Dispatch Box equal to the strength of some of these contributions.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): We have heard throughout the afternoon all the things in Gaza that have been committed by Israel. The truth of the matter is that Israel is committing the cold-blooded murder of medics, civilians, UN staff and even many aid workers in the aid flotilla in international waters. In the west bank, there are more than 500,000 illegal settlers, and illegal violent settlers using force, backed by the IDF and the Israelis, have been killing and maiming people. Does that not show that the actions of Israel have been all about occupying Gaza and the west bank and that, as Israeli Cabinet Ministers have been saying, Israel basically wants a full Judea and Samaria and that it will not stop at Gaza or the west bank, but continue?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Before I bring in the Minister, may I ask hon. Members and the Minister to make their questions and answers a little bit shorter?

Mr Falconer: Let me restate the British Government's position in relation to the west bank and the Gaza strip: we hope that both those territories will be a vital part of a single Palestinian state and that is the objective towards which we strive.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): In the past year, 100,000 tonnes of bombs have been dropped on Gaza, which is the equivalent of five times the power of the nuclear weapons used over Hiroshima and Nagasaki some 80 years ago. That action in Gaza has resulted in the deaths of at least 60,000 people, and on top of that we are now going to have the complete invasion of Gaza by Israel. At what point will the Government cease all arms supplies and military co-operation with Israel, cease the use of RAF Akrotiri and, above all, stop the export of any parts for F-35 jets, which have been complicit in the killing of 60,000 people in Gaza? Surely it is time for the British Government to say no: no more, no weapons, no co-operation, no support, and to save lives in Gaza and the west bank. Now is the time to say and do that.

Mr Falconer: I have set out the position in relation to the carve-out for F-35 components. To be clear to the House, we have suspended the sale of F-35 parts where they go directly to Israel. It is only when we do not know their final destination that their sale is not suspended. I will not rehearse the recognition points, given the pressure on time.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Let us be clear, the masked murderers of Hamas could end the suffering of the Gazan people today if they released the hostages and agreed to a ceasefire. But let us also be clear that this extremist Israeli Government, in their own actions in the past few days and weeks, are endangering the state of Israel. As the right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) made absolutely clear, the Israeli Government are undermining the state of Israel by their actions, more than any Hamas extremist could dream of. I agree with what the Minister says about practical measures and pragmatism rather than symbolism, but does he not think that the most practical step that this country can take is to recognise the state of Palestine, in conjunction with other states, as soon as possible, in order to move the peace process on?

Mr Falconer: I assure my hon. Friend that we want to move this process on, towards a political horizon and a peaceful solution, as quickly as we possibly can.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I have been in the Minister's shoes and I sympathise with him as he grapples with an extremely complicated and fraught situation, but does he agree that there cannot be any sustainable peace in the region or a viable Palestine without dealing with Hamas? If so, what would be his plan to achieve that with others, beyond pious rhetoric and hand-wringing?

Mr Falconer: The right hon. Gentleman is knowledgeable and experienced. He is right to focus on the central importance of removing Hamas from any position in Gaza where they could pose a threat, both to the Palestinian people and to Israeli civilians, who have suffered so terribly at their hands. The answer is to remove Hamas and have the Palestinian Authority returned to their rightful place as the sole legitimate Government authority for both the west bank and Gaza.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): In addition to continuing its cruel aid blockade, a far-right Israeli Minister deplorably told a gathering in the Occupied Palestinian Territories that Gaza is to be "entirely destroyed" and Palestinians will be forced to flee in large numbers "to third countries". Will the Minister wholeheartedly condemn that, as well as the Netanyahu regime's proposals to expand their military operations in Gaza? Will he confirm to the House exactly what the Government are doing, with their international allies, to stop these cruel and callous proposals?

Mr Falconer: As I told my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), I have not seen those remarks, but we have been clear about what we think is acceptable and we have condemned remarks by other Israeli Ministers. Once I have had an opportunity to review the remarks that my hon. Friends mention, I am sure I will be in a position to provide a further comment. I reiterate our condemnation of the cruelty of some of the measures that have been put in place, particularly the block on aid into Gaza.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): An Israeli human rights group has now described Israel as using starvation as a method of warfare, which is a war crime under article 54 of the Geneva convention. Will

the Minister join Ireland, South Africa and many other countries in clarifying that there has been a genocide and apartheid against the people of Palestine? It is time to speak up and out, and to speak for Palestine.

Mr Falconer: I will not rehearse the points I have already made about the determination of genocide and about recognition.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): The evacuation orders of the Israeli forces have resulted in the forcible transfer of Palestinians in Gaza into ever-shrinking spaces, where they have little or no access to lifesaving services and continue to be subjected to attacks. What steps will the Government take to put pressure on Israel to ensure it does not go ahead with its plans to move Gaza's population? Do the Government agree that the plans constitute forced displacement, which is a war crime?

Mr Falconer: As I have said, we are clear on the status of forced displacement under international law. My hon. Friend's contribution is very important. I know many hon. Members are conscious of the multiple displacements of many Palestinians in Gaza, who have been displaced not once or twice, but in many cases more than three times. The treatment of Palestinian civilians who are just trying to live is terrible, and I share the feelings of the House about that.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): The UK Government were right to state at the International Court of Justice last week that Israel has a responsibility under international law to provide food and essential humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza, and yet we know that Israel has blocked all aid shipments for the past two months. Given the catastrophe unfolding before our eyes, is it not worth resurrecting negotiations and discussions with international allies about the possible airdrop of humanitarian aid, so that, at the very least, we cannot say that we sat idly by and watched an entire population starve?

Mr Falconer: We have been involved in discussions about airdrops. There is a role for them and we have spoken with partners in the region who have been keen to see airdrops as a contribution, particularly given the pressures on aid, and I am not ruling them out. However, given the scale of humanitarian aid that is needed, I must be clear with the House that helicopter airdrops can only reach a certain level, so while that aid would be welcome, it would be a very partial response to the scale of need that we see.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): The Israeli Government's plan to expand their military offensive in Gaza, including holding ground and moving the Palestinian population to the south of the district, is wholly unacceptable. It is a clear act of aggression and flies in the face of international law. I welcome the Minister's statement that this Government strongly condemn Israel's actions, but does he accept from voices across the House that the recognition of Palestine as a state is imperative if we are to work towards a lasting peace?

Mr Falconer: I agree with my hon. Friend that a safe and secure Palestinian state, alongside its neighbour, a safe and secure Israeli state, will in the end be the vital component of sustainable peace in the region.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): Madam Deputy Speaker,

"Gaza will be entirely destroyed".

That is a direct quote from Israel's Minister of Finance, Bezalel Smotrich, earlier today. That is the language of ethnic cleansing and genocide from a pariah Government who are using starvation as a weapon of war. Warnings that the Israeli Government will seek to displace the entire Palestinian population and flatten all of Gaza have been repeatedly ignored by this Government over many months, yet that is now the reality that Gazans face. Given that the UK have continued to give support to Israel throughout the conflict—there are reports that an RAF jet flew to Israel with F-35 parts and military personnel only last week—have British intelligence services and the Foreign Office been blindsided by Israel's approved plan?

Mr Falconer: If the hon. Gentleman is asking whether the Foreign Office was aware of the plan before it was announced, the answer is that we were not aware. In all of our interactions since we became the Government, we have been clear on the view we would take on proposals of this nature.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): For more than a year and a half, we have witnessed a genocide being livestreamed on our screens. We have seen children in Gaza being blown apart by Israeli bombs and infants wasting away from Israel's imposed starvation, and now Israel is proposing a full invasion and occupation of the entire strip. The Israeli Government are making a mockery of international law, and we are enabling it. It is not enough for the UK Government just to condemn the Israeli Government; when will our Government end all arms sales to Israel and implement trade sanctions? We cannot be asking in years to come, "What did we do to prevent a genocide?" and for the answer to be, "Not enough."

Mr Falconer: I will not rehearse the F-35 points that I discussed with the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), but on my hon. Friend's point about international law, this Government will continue to stand for international law, as we did on Friday at the ICJ. We were absolutely clear on our position on international law as it pertains to the occupying power, which is what Israel finds itself as in Gaza.

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): From the Father of the House to the 2024 intake, we are hearing across the Chamber—from Labour, Conservative, Green, Plaid and Scottish National colleagues—a consensus about what the Government need to do on behalf of the British people. We need our Government to recognise the Palestinian state, we need to make sure that the hostages are returned home, and we need to stop the killing of innocent Palestinians who are now faced with starvation. Minister, on behalf of this House of Commons, I plead with you and the Government to take action—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): With the Minister. You do not plead with me.

Mr Dillon: Sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker. We plead with the Minister and the Government to take action

[Mr Dillon]

on behalf of all of us as hon. Members in this House, and to do the right thing and show leadership. We are capable of leadership; we need to act.

Mr Falconer: I have been at this Dispatch Box on many occasions discussing these issues, but I can confirm to the hon. Gentleman that I have felt the force of the contributions made this afternoon.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I thank the Minister for coming to the House this afternoon to give this update, and for his strong opposition to the proposed expansion of Israel's military operation. Constituents continue to be horrified—as do we all—by the consequences of the assault on Gaza, the blockade of aid, and now the news of escalation this weekend. They ask, if diplomacy is failing, what comes next? What more can the Minister tell my constituents about the latest negotiations? I join others from across the House in the call for meaningful action, including recognition.

Mr Falconer: We are fully committed to playing our full diplomatic role. I hear the frustrations of my hon. Friend's constituents—indeed, I hear the same frustrations from my own constituents in Lincoln. I know that many across the country watch these scenes with growing horror that they continue this long into the conflict. We will be working on this issue, including with our European partners, particularly France and Germany. We have issued E3 statements together; it is a source of shared frustration that more progress has not been made. As I said in an earlier answer, we hope to see progress towards a ceasefire. We are supporting the efforts of Special Envoy Witkoff in that regard, and we will spare no effort.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): Over and over again, from all parts of this House, we witness grandstanding against mass migration and the most vulnerable in any society—refugees and asylum seekers—while knowing all too well that refugee crises are not born in a vacuum, as attested to by the situation unfolding in Gaza before the eyes of the world. Refugees have no choice; they are forced out of their homes and thrust on the world, looking for somewhere safe to seek asylum. After last week's elections, the Prime Minister—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is going to get to his question very quickly.

Mr Hussain: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. After last week's elections, the Prime Minister pledged to the British public that he would go harder on the issue of migration. Given what the Israeli Government are now saying, I ask the Minister whether his Government will come down harder—through action, not mere condemnation—to ensure that the world is not faced with a new and devastating refugee crisis.

Mr Falconer: As the hon. Gentleman knows, one of the most painful elements of this crisis has been that even those Palestinians in Gaza who wish to leave have not been able to do so. Regrettably, we have already discussed forced displacement many times this afternoon,

so I will not rehearse the point, but I can assure him that in the face of potential further escalation in the conflict, we will redouble our efforts to secure the ceasefire that I know everybody in this House wants to see restored.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am going to get all Members in, but I urge short questions.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Lab): Israel is starving Gaza to death. I am sorry, Minister, but when Israel is using starvation as a weapon of war and Palestinians are being ethnically cleansed before our eyes, mere words of regret or condemnation from the Government are simply not good enough. We in this House will be judged in history for failing the Palestinian people, so I urge the Minister to listen to the consensus that is being built across the House today and act. We do not need words; we need action for the Palestinian people.

Mr Falconer: I have heard the force of the contributions. I say gently to my hon. Friend that unlike my predecessors, I have taken action in response to this crisis, as have the Foreign Secretary and others. However, in the face of the scenes coming out of Gaza, it is clear that no one can be claiming victory at the moment.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement, as well as for his carefully chosen words; it is never easy to respond to all these questions. As he has stated, peace talks must be a priority for the region, and it is absolutely essential that food and aid can reach children. Has the Minister been able to talk with our allies in Israel about allowing independent third parties immediate access to Gaza to distribute needed supplies, while also ensuring—very importantly—that Israel's safety is not compromised in any way?

Mr Falconer: The hon. Gentleman talks about the importance of independence and impartiality, which are exactly the principles that should be guiding the humanitarian operation in Gaza. He is absolutely right that Hamas must not be diverting aid for their own financial gain or using civilian infrastructure for military purposes. The best way to ensure that is to open up Gaza and allow the aid agencies in to operate effectively.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): The Israeli Government have publicly declared their intent to occupy Gaza indefinitely, and are systematically denying Gaza's entire population access to the most basic needs for sustaining human survival. This is a war crime, so does the Minister agree that, alongside France, the UK Government must urgently recognise the state of Palestine at the United Nations conference on the two-state solution in June?

Mr Falconer: I reassure my hon. Friend that we want to make our full contribution in moving a two-state solution forward, and of course, we are in touch with all key regional partners in the run-up to the June conference.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): Missing from so much of the debate around the awful conflict in Gaza are the voices of the Israeli people and the opposition. They have been crying out for another hostage and ceasefire

deal. Israel is a liberal democracy with elections due next year. Does the Minister agree with opposition figures, such as Yair Lapid, Benny Gantz and Yair Golan, that the threatened expansion of operations in Gaza will do nothing to bring the 59 hostages home or to remove the Iranian-sponsored death cult that is Hamas?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend has a deep focus on these issues and is committed to playing his full role here in them. He will understand why I decline the opportunity to comment on Israel's internal politics. I will restate the British Government's view, though, that the fastest route to safety for those hostages is a ceasefire. The points that he makes are made with some force.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. I appreciate that the Minister cannot comment directly on sanctions, but he knows that I have privately urged him to consider further sanctions and further measurable action. Given the ongoing horror and the statement from the Israeli Government, please will the Minister consider further concrete action?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend guesses right about my likely response: I will not comment on sanctions from this Dispatch Box. She has raised these issues with real force with me, and I am sure that she will continue to do so. We will continue to keep sanctions under review.

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement, and I very much welcome the strong words of condemnation. None of us will ever forget the horrors of 7 October for the Israeli people, but these latest announcements show an Israeli Government who I fear are out of control and making fools of us as allies. First, when my hon. Friend commits to using the full diplomatic weight to bring about that ceasefire that we all urgently want to see, what concrete next steps does he envisage, given that neither Hamas nor Netanyahu seem bothered in the slightest about international humanitarian law? Secondly, the Prime Minister has previously described the recognition of a Palestinian state as an "undeniable right", so when will we see that right honoured?

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for his commitment to these issues. I will not rehearse the arguments about recognition. It is obviously a vital part of what I hope will be a practical set of steps forward to try to address the truly horrific scenes we see emanating from Gaza. I join him in pressing on those party to the conflict who are in breach of their international humanitarian law obligations to change their approach.

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): I echo the Minister's words condemning Hamas and condemning the Houthi attacks on Ben Gurion airport. An aid blockade is an aid blockade, annexation is annexation and war crimes are war crimes. Israel may be our formal ally, but this weekend the Israeli Government have committed to the seizure and occupation of the Gaza strip, which this Government have repeatedly stated is a violation of international law. Can the Minister tell this House the reasoning that FCDO officials have provided to him for not escalating UK sanctions on Israel? Does

he agree with me and the calls of this House that the time has come for significant action in the face of crimes that, had they been committed by any other country, we would have already done something about?

Mr Falconer: As my hon. Friend knows, officials advise and Ministers decide, so I will not labour the questions about Foreign Office advice. We will be taking action in response to the events that we see, as this House would expect. I will not comment on sanctions further from the Dispatch Box, but I recognise the force of the contributions and the commitment of many of my hon. Friends, including her, on these questions.

Frank McNally (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for coming to the House today. The long-term occupation of Gaza is entirely incompatible with a viable two-state solution and completely undermines any small prospect of a lasting peace. A full-scale occupation of Gaza is inconsistent with international humanitarian law, so can the Minister please advise the House and give some reassurance that the Government are considering urgently recognising the state of Palestine? If the Israeli Government move on the actions that have been referenced throughout this debate, will the Government seriously look at further sanctions? I know the Minister does not like to talk about that from the Dispatch Box, but can he give an assurance that such a review will take place, should Israel move forward with the actions that it has outlined?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend is right that permanent occupation of Gaza would be a grievous blow to a two-state solution. Clearly, the Gaza strip should be a central part of a Palestinian state, and I can assure him that we continue to keep all these matters under close review.

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. It is crucial that there is recognition of the Palestinian state and that the Palestinian people are represented as equals at the negotiating table. Given what has gone on in the region recently, does the Minister agree that Israel must immediately lift all restrictions on aid and allow unfettered access to humanitarian assistance in Gaza? If Israel refuses, what levers can we use to save innocent lives?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend is right about the critical nature of the aid shortages in Gaza. The World Food Programme has been clear that it is running out of all stocks to sustain life, and it is vital that the Israelis reverse their path and allow aid back into the strip.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): The Palestinian people have a right to determine the future of their country. What specific action will the Minister take on the proposed indefinite occupation by Israel of Gaza? It risks eroding the sovereignty of the Palestinian people, sets an extreme precedent in international law, and ultimately jeopardises any path to a lasting peace.

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend asks important questions. We are raising these issues directly with the Israeli Government, and we are talking with our allies about what steps we may take next.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): It has now been more than two months since Israel blocked food and aid getting into Gaza. Aid agencies tell us that 95% of their work has been stopped or drastically reduced because of the blockade. I welcome the Minister's comments condemning these appalling actions, but we are now facing a total collapse of the aid system in Gaza. Is it not time now to go further than words and take action against these extremist Ministers who are advocating for this starvation policy?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend is a former aid worker. He understands how these things work, and his warnings about the scale of risk for the humanitarian system, which is supporting so many Palestinian lives, are well made. I will not rehearse the comments I have made.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): The Government are right to strongly oppose the Israeli Government's plan to expand military action, which is unconscionable. Does the Minister agree that what should be expanded is the provision of humanitarian aid, and that what should be intensified are negotiations and diplomatic pressure on all parties to bring about a ceasefire, a return of hostages and a credible peace process that results in two sovereign states?

Mr Falconer: I do agree with my hon. Friend's well-made point.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): Gaza has had aid blocked for two months. Netanyahu said that the population may be moved for their own safety—safety from whom? Can the Minister explain what further diplomatic consequences Israel will face if it continues down this road?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend is right to centre on the safety of the Palestinian people. Diplomacy in relation to this situation continues at pace. I will not provide a running commentary from the Dispatch Box, but I can assure him that we are in direct contact with the Israeli Government on these questions and with our allies to discuss next steps.

Point of Order

6.49 pm

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. During Prime Minister's questions last Wednesday, I was sitting behind the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage). I made some comments, and I learned the lesson that the microphones in this place are very good and pick up comments made by those sitting directly behind hon. Members. The comments that I made related to the second earnings of the hon. Member for Clacton, declared in his entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. A Reform UK social media account digitally manipulated those comments to give the appearance that I had described the hon. Member using a four-letter expletive.

This is misinformation. It is fake news. It is Trumpian tactics. It was reported to Elon Musk's X; no response was received. If footage in this House is allowed to be digitally manipulated for political ends in the name of Members of this House, that puts at risk the proceedings in this House and, I believe, puts at risk democracy. I have raised this point of order to put the facts on the public record so that my constituents and everyone else know what actually happened, and to seek your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker, on what I should do.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. It is not a matter for the Chair, but as Members on both sides of the House will know, downloading and sharing clips of proceedings in the Chamber is subject to conditions of use, and clips should not be manipulated in such a way as to be misleading. May I suggest that the hon. Member raise the matter with the director of parliamentary audio and video as a matter of urgency?

Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority (Review)

6.51 pm

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

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Secretary of State to review the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority; and for connected purposes.

From time to time, this House has asked itself the question: what value do we place on support for the victims of violent crime? I believe that this is the right time to ask ourselves that question again.

Victim support can take many forms, including non-financial measures. We have got better, but we must get better still, at recognising the lifelong impact that violent crime has on a person. Victims would benefit from better sharing of information about support services, both public and voluntary, and the processes for accessing NHS diagnostic and therapeutic support. That information sharing should start with the police, the ambulance services and the Crown Prosecution Service, and I was pleased to hear recently from the CPS west midlands region about the enhanced victim support that is now in place. Nevertheless, there will always be cases in which financial loss has occurred, or financial remedy is a necessary or otherwise appropriate means of providing some measure of justice for those who have suffered assault.

I think that Members in all parts of the House would wholeheartedly endorse the principle that, whenever possible, the perpetrators of violent crime should pay the costs of restitution. Indeed, it is a welcome and remarkable achievement that the amount recovered to fund support services through the victim surcharge—first introduced in 2007—has nearly doubled over the last four years. However, the criminal injuries compensation scheme exists because some offenders lack, or cannot be proved to possess, the assets or revenue to pay those costs—the so-called straw men of the justice system—and in still more cases, the perpetrators of violence are never identified. Crime statistics notoriously do not tell the full story, but in the West Midlands police force area, nearly one in five violent assaults are not prosecuted because no suspect can be named. I commend the chief constable, Craig Guildford, and the police and crime commissioner, Simon Foster, for their success in increasing the number and the share of identified assailants, but the point stands.

The animating force behind the current criminal injuries compensation scheme was a Birmingham magistrate and the first secretary of the Howard League for Penal Reform, Margery Fry, who led a campaign in the 1950s under the clarion call of “Justice for Victims.” She argued that criminal injuries could not be narrowly considered to be a private matter between the assailant and the victim. Just as we provide for each other in times of sickness through national insurance, so too, she argued, a duty is owed by the state when it fails to prevent one citizen from injuring another. In her words, “the State ... cannot disown all responsibility for its occasional failure to protect.”

Today that same principle is set out by the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority, which says that payment is sometimes needed as an

“acknowledgement of harm and an important gesture of public sympathy.”

The criminal injuries compensation scheme is now an integral part of the justice system, even if it is—as the Chair of the Justice Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter), put it last week—something of a “Cinderella service”.

Nothing that I say today is intended as a criticism of the staff of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority; they work hard in difficult circumstances, given that staff numbers have fallen by a fifth since the current iteration of the scheme was introduced in 2012. The civil service people survey shows that they take pride and find professional fulfilment in their work, and, as someone who once received an award from the scheme, I remain grateful to them.

Important and positive improvements have been made since, six years ago, the Victims’ Commissioner published an excoriating report. Let me say at this point how welcome it is to see the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), in her place. I know that she cares deeply about victim support as well as having specialist knowledge of this issue, and I am grateful to her for her thoughtful responses and conversations about it. However, it is also clear that failings remain within the system, as we heard last week when Members across parties contributed to a debate in Westminster Hall.

I draw particular attention today to the delays that too many applicants still experience; a lack of signposting or integration with wider support services, and a general lack of public awareness of the scheme itself; the trauma of dog attacks on postal workers and other victims by new and banned breeds, the victims of which are mostly ineligible for compensation following changes to the scheme in 2012; the recommendations of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse; a supposedly £500,000-a-year hardship fund, established 13 years ago, that is now essentially a dead letter—the criteria are so restrictive that no payments have been made from it in the last seven years; and the tariff system itself, as many serious and life-changing injuries are not covered at all. It is true that the upper cap on the scheme is generous by international standards, but the lowest limit of £1,000 has been frozen in cash terms since 1992.

My hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson) referred in this place to annex B of the scheme, which defines a “crime of violence” as including “a sexual assault to which a person did not in fact consent”.

Those are words and ideas from another age. Even if the courts now adopt a more informed interpretation, the continued presence of that definition can only cause harm, and it must be struck from the scheme.

These problems—and I believe, on the basis of my own casework and that of other Members, that they do to an extent persist—impose a heavy burden on the victims of crime. Like some other Members, I bear the physical scars of violent crime, alongside other scars of a different and more subtle kind. I have spoken previously, in another debate, about that experience, and I do not intend to repeat those words today. It is enough to ask hon. Members to take it on trust that delays, the seemingly

[Laurence Turner]

arbitrary rules of the scheme, the manner of the communication, and, sometimes, poor decision making can add to the sum of the pain that victims feel—a pain that can only be partially outweighed by the release that the end of the criminal injuries process brings. A perpetrator might evade justice, but it is part of the nature of the trauma response that, at a slight or unexpected prompting, a victim may be compelled to relive that crime again and again.

That is why the Victims' Commissioner has called for an overarching review of the scheme to establish

“whether it actually fulfils its stated remit: to acknowledge the harm suffered by victims of violent crime who have no other access to compensation, and to provide redress as part of a just and compassionate response.”

That is what the Bill, which I beg leave to introduce, would achieve. The legislation would set out a simple requirement for a fundamental review, and for Ministers to report back to the House with proposals for further scrutiny and debate.

I cannot stand here and claim that easy answers exist to all these questions. Although I note that, to the best of my calculations, the cost of the scheme appears to be falling in real terms, we live in straitened financial times. That is why it is better for reform of the scheme to be carried out in a deliberative manner, on the basis of accurate and recent evidence, and with the needs of victims as the primary concern. To that end, I take heart from the Minister's statement; although she said that the Government do not plan changes to the scheme “at this time”, she went on to say:

“The clear message to me is that we need change, and I will be considering how Government can best provide the support that victims need and deserve.”

I also take heart from the Prime Minister's statement of personal support for the victims of violent crime when this matter was raised with him a fortnight ago by my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols).

This issue touches the lives of people in every one of our constituencies. No amount of money can return someone to their mental or physical state prior to an assault, but a well-functioning, fair and compassionate scheme can bring victims some measure of justice.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Laurence Turner, Charlotte Nichols, Michael Wheeler, Andy Slaughter, Warinder Juss, Antonia Bance, Chris Bloore, Catherine Atkinson, Kevin McKenna, Mark Sowards, Tim Roca and Alistair Strathern present the Bill.

Laurence Turner accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 June, and to be printed (Bill 231).

Victory in Europe and Victory over Japan: 80th Anniversary

7.2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe and Victory over Japan.

I am honoured to be opening today's debate as we come together as a House and a country to mark 80 years since victory in Europe on Thursday 8 May. On 15 August, we will mark victory over Japan.

In May 1940, in his first speech as Prime Minister, Churchill proclaimed,

“let us go forward together with our united strength.”—[*Official Report*, 13 May 1940; Vol. 360, c. 1502.]

That is what the country did. That generation's united strength carried them through six years of war, six years of suffering and six years of sacrifice to preserve the way of life that we enjoy and the values that we hold dear today. From the evacuation of Dunkirk to the battle of Britain and the blitz, we remember the brave service personnel from Great Britain and the Commonwealth who served their country, and those who paid the ultimate sacrifice for our freedoms. We thank you and we remember you.

We remember those on the home front, the evacuated children and the women who stepped into essential roles. I think of my Aunt Kath, my grandad's cousin, who went to work for the first time in a factory, and of the Bevin boys—many from Barnsley—who worked down the pit to power the war effort. We are proud to remember their contribution and the lasting legacy of peace that they fought so hard to secure—today and always.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I notice an oversight in the Minister's contribution: Northern Ireland made a very significant contribution. There was never any conscription needed in Northern Ireland, and the great thing about it was that the women filled the gap. They worked in aircraft factories, at Harland and Wolff, in engineering, on the farms, in the fields and in rope factories. Some 12,500 women made a contribution to support their men at the front.

Stephanie Peacock: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I will come on to speak about Northern Ireland later in my contribution. I was delighted to visit Northern Ireland a few weeks ago to see at first hand how it will commemorate VE Day. I am sure that Members will share how their constituencies or families played their part in the war effort.

This year's commemorations to mark VE Day and VJ Day have been, and will continue to be, led by those with first-hand experience of the war, and the Government are honoured to be working with veterans and the Royal British Legion to bring this to life. However, as we mark 80 years between today and the end of the war, the number of people with living memory of it is becoming ever smaller. This year's anniversary may be the last when veterans who contributed directly to the victory can be in attendance, and when young people can speak to family members who contributed to the effort. I am lucky to have grown up hearing stories from

my grandad, who served in the Royal Air Force, but the generation born today may not have the same opportunities to connect directly with veterans. It is up to us to keep their memory alive.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The Minister talks about victory. Will she join me in paying tribute to Corporal Thomas Priddy, from the 1st Battalion of the King's Shropshire Light Infantry, who was one of the first soldiers killed in world war two? While she is paying tribute to him and his relatives, will she also pay tribute to the Shropshire Royal Horse Artillery and the Shropshire Yeomanry, which had a distinguished campaign in Italy?

Stephanie Peacock: I join the right hon. Gentleman in paying tribute. He makes an incredibly important point, which he has put on the record, and I am really pleased to echo his sentiments. As I was saying, it is up to all of us to keep the collective memory alive as time marches forward.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): As we celebrate 80 years since the liberation of our continent from a fascist, tyrannical regime, we must be forever grateful to the brave souls who fought and fell for our freedom. Does the Minister agree that we in Europe are once again faced by a regime that is hellbent on subjugation and tyranny? We must stand up to the aggressors and bullies, and remember that peace is hard won.

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. I am joined by the Defence Secretary, who also heard his point.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I am enjoying the Minister's contribution. Does she agree that the reason we observe 80th anniversaries is that they can be veteran-led? Sadly, that will not be the case in 2039. Does she also agree that it is important that we start to plan for the centenary of the second world war? Having been heavily involved in the centenary of the great war, I can say that the UK began its preparations just a little bit too late compared with our friends and allies.

Stephanie Peacock: The right hon. Gentleman makes an incredibly important point, and I spoke to the head of the Imperial War Museum about this issue yesterday. We absolutely need to start to plan now.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): The Minister is being incredibly generous. She mentions the Imperial War Museum. Does she share my regret at its decision to close the gallery displaying over 200 Victoria Crosses and George Crosses, which were collected by Lord Ashcroft and given to the gallery for permanent public display? Could she perhaps ask the Imperial War Museum to reconsider that decision?

Stephanie Peacock: I absolutely hear the right hon. Gentleman's point, and I know that we have spoken about it previously. The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism has had conversations with both Lord Ashcroft and the Imperial War Museum. He is the

Minister responsible for museums. I will relay those comments to him, and I will follow up to the right hon. Gentleman in writing.

I will speak about our national remembrance and celebration this week in a moment, but I will touch first on how important the collective memory and legacy is. This Government have launched a number of initiatives to ensure that every generation—young and old—can connect with the history of their families and communities. "Letters to Loved Ones" has encouraged schoolchildren and family members to explore their family histories by looking for old letters and artefacts to help them learn about life during wartime, and to share them on our website. My mum and dad discovered some lovely letters between my grandparents during the war and just after, when they had got married.

To inspire young people to learn about what life was like during wartime Britain, we also announced "Our Shared Story", which brought together a range of educational resources. They include material for schools from the Royal British Legion called "I'll Remember", which focuses on conversations between veterans and young people. People across the country will also be invited to watch "The Next Morning", a brand-new National Theatre production written by award-winning screenwriter and playwright James Graham. This short film focuses on the hopes, dreams and ambitions of young people after the second world war.

I have written to schools across my constituency to share these materials, and like all of the community engagement resources, they are designed to run through the year to VJ Day and beyond. For instance, the Tip Top Towns initiative is a call to action for community and volunteering groups to get their town or village ready for the commemorations, whether that be with bunting, litter picking or crochet bonnets for letterboxes. I spotted crochet bonnets in Hoyland and Darfield in my area this weekend.

To deliver the VE and VJ 80 programme of events and national engagement, the Government have worked with an array of brilliant partners, including the Imperial War Museums, the National Theatre, the RBL, Atlantic Productions, Arts Council England, the Together Coalition, the BBC and, of course, all the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and Ministry of Defence officials and service personnel. I would like to express my gratitude for their commitment, and I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to all those currently serving in our armed forces.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I will add one more to that list of excellent organisations supporting the programme, and that is the National Memorial Arboretum in Alrewas. It is really important that we celebrate VE Day and VJ Day in Staffordshire, where Reginald Mitchell, the designer of the Spitfire, was born—in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee)—and where RAF Lichfield, the busiest airfield in Staffordshire during the second world war, was sited, just down the road from where we will be celebrating in Alrewas.

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Later in my speech, I will talk about the National Memorial Arboretum, which I was pleased to visit a couple of years ago.

[Stephanie Peacock]

We want the whole of the UK to feel included and involved in VE Day and VJ Day celebrations, wherever they live and whoever they are. Events to mark the occasion began yesterday. The Cenotaph was draped in flags overnight into Monday for the first time since it was unveiled in 1920. That was followed by the military procession, which included over 1,300 armed forces personnel and uniformed youth, and it was accompanied by a flypast led by a second world war RAF Lancaster and featuring the Red Arrows.

Indeed, when the news of peace in Europe arrived here in 1945, spontaneous celebrations broke out in the streets. Those parties were replicated by street parties up and down the country yesterday, and I was delighted to join His Majesty the King and members of the royal family to meet veterans at a tea party at Buckingham Palace. May I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the fact that it is two years to the day since His Majesty the King's coronation? I was also pleased to attend the Imperial War Museums celebration aboard HMS Belfast. I know communities across the country will have come together in celebration, and I thank all mayors and local authorities for the local events they have been leading and will continue to lead.

This evening, iconic buildings will be lit up as beacons of strength and national unity, symbolising the return of light after an era of blackouts lasting six years and echoing the moment when the face of Big Ben was relit. From today until Remembrance Day in November, almost 30,000 ceramic poppies on loan from the Imperial War Museums will cascade from the Tower of London, recreating the world war one centenary installation in 2014. The poppies represent a wound at the heart of the Tower, which survived the blitz, and they are being unveiled this evening as we speak.

Tomorrow, a special performance by the Parliament choir will take place. The Imperial War Museums and the National Theatre are working together to showcase "Letters to Loved Ones" and to premier their new film "The Next Morning", highlighting the huge impact that living history can have.

On VE Day itself, an official service of remembrance will take place at Westminster Abbey, before celebrations conclude with the VE Day concert. The concert, shown live on the BBC, will mirror this with a mix of music, poetry and the spoken word to reflect our proud national stories, values and culture. Through these events, we can make sure that the legacies of those who gave their lives will always have the same profound impact.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): This is a particularly poignant debate for me to attend today, because this morning I attended the funeral of Betty Webb, a 101-year-old former Bletchley Park codebreaker who epitomised the very best of this great generation. Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to and thanking Betty, as we lay her to rest, for the sacrifice and commitment she provided to the war effort?

Stephanie Peacock: I absolutely join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to Betty. I thank her for her service, as I am sure the whole House does.

I thank my counterparts in the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland Governments for their support and engagement. Thanks to them, events and services will

take place in every devolved nation. To name a few, Northern Ireland will host a beacon-lighting ceremony. I was pleased to take up the invitation from the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) to see how her community will mark the occasion. Services of commemoration are taking place in Wales, such as the national service of thanksgiving tomorrow evening and the VE Day anniversary parade in Swansea on the 11th. I look forward to meeting my counterpart in Cardiff next week. This evening, the Royal British Legion Scotland and Poppyscotland will host the Scotland's Salute concert at the Usher Hall. I was pleased to visit the Scottish war memorial in Edinburgh a few weeks ago to pay tribute to the Scottish soldiers who paid the ultimate sacrifice.

Mr Dhesi: The Minister is making an excellent speech. As I celebrated VE Day with my Slough constituents—for example, in Britwell and at the event organised by the Royal British Legion in Cippenham—we reflected on the contributions of our family members, including my great-grandfather, my grandmother's brother and others, who fought during those conflicts. Does the Minister agree that those armies fighting for our freedom closely reflected and are representative of modern-day Britain, and we must use that very fact when countering those who espouse hatred and division?

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend makes a really important point, and I echo it.

As we reflect throughout this week, we must of course remember everyone who supported the war effort, particularly those in the Channel Islands whose courage is woven into the fabric of our freedom. The Channel Islands were not liberated until 9 May, and their story is one of hardship and perseverance. To mark liberation day, the Ministry of Justice will be flying the flags of Jersey and Guernsey in commemoration. I will be visiting Jersey and Sark at the end of this week to commemorate liberation day. I look forward to participating in the commemorations, and to meeting and hearing about the soldiers, civilians and children who sacrificed so much.

The second world war was truly that—a world war—and Britain would not be the country we know it to be today if it was not for the Commonwealth troops who fought tirelessly for the allied victory. I am pleased to be working with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission as part of the VE Day and VJ Day commemorations to ensure that the commemorations are worldwide. Its global "For Evermore" tour will honour and shine a light on the stories of those from across the world who fought in the second world war, visiting Belgium, Italy, Malta, France and the Netherlands, and places across the UK, to bring the stories of British and Commonwealth soldiers to life.

It is important to note that many of these service personnel continued to fight in the Pacific long after the war on the European front had come to an end. We will mark that contribution again on VJ Day on 15 August. On the first VJ Day 80 years ago, Clement Attlee, the Prime Minister at the time, said to this House:

"Thus the long, grievous war is at an end, and peace on earth has been restored."—[*Official Report*, 15 August 1945; Vol. 413, c. 48.]

Indeed, those six years of war saw the generations before us make tremendous sacrifices to preserve the way of life we enjoy today. On VJ Day, the Royal British

Legion will lead the nation in honouring those who fought and died during the war in the far east with a service at the National Memorial Arboretum.

The legacy of those who gave or risked their lives will always have a profound impact, and it is up to all of us to keep their stories alive. As the poet Edmund Blunden wrote in his poem “V Day”,

“once more we have come through.”

Moments of national unity live long in our memories—from the Olympics to Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II’s jubilees. They bring us together and they remind us of our communal values, how we pull together in times of adversity, how we show compassion to our neighbours and how we put our community before division in times of need. I am grateful that we, as a House and as a country, have had the opportunity to create another moment of such unity, today and throughout the year, as we remember that great generation, all they gave and all they fought for.

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

7.19 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): I thank the Minister for her excellent speech and welcome all that the Government have done in preparation for VE Day and VJ Day.

The 80th anniversaries of VE Day and VJ Day are a time for the nation to come together and celebrate the conclusion of the second world war—a war in which good triumphed over evil and liberated millions of people from the horrors of fascism. On VE Day, millions rejoiced across the western world, relieved that years of conflict and immense hardship were finally coming to an end. On 8 May 1945, British people—including Her Royal Highness, the then Princess Elizabeth—flocked to the streets to celebrate the defeat of Nazi Germany and the liberation of Europe. People danced long into the night, attended street parties and looked forward to a brighter future.

We must not forget, however, that as those parties wore on, troops from Britain and the Commonwealth, as well as our allies, continued to take the struggle to Japan. It was not until August 1945 that there was victory over Japan. VJ Day marked the conclusion of the war in the far east, and we must never forget the sacrifices of the troops who helped to liberate millions of people from imperial Japan.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): One of my constituents, Pam Gillespie, often leads the VJ Day commemorations in Harlow because her father, George Money, was a far east prisoner of war. Will the shadow Minister join me in thanking people like Pam? Does he agree that it is hugely important that we recognise VJ Day and that, while the war in Europe may have been over, there was still a war going on and many servicemen were still giving their lives?

Saqib Bhatti: On this point, the hon. Gentleman and I are friends; I thank Pam and her family for their sacrifice and for all that happens on VJ Day.

VE Day and VJ Day must forever be remembered and etched into our memories. I am sure this whole House will agree that it is important that we remember these historic days for years to come. This year, 2025, is

especially important, as it may well be one of the last years troops who served in the second world war are still alive.

I want to ask the Minister, on behalf of the shadow Secretary of State, if she will comment directly on his campaign to bring home a statue of Vera Lynn. The late Sir David Amess launched an appeal to create a lasting memorial to Dame Vera Lynn, whose songs kept our troops’ morale high, often in times of huge uncertainty and great peril. During the battle of Britain, when it looked like the Nazis might invade Britain at any moment, she really did keep the bluebirds singing over the “White Cliffs of Dover”. The committee need to raise £350,000 to complete the bronzing process and bring the memorial home from the Czech Republic. Could the Minister confirm that this fitting tribute will indeed be brought home?

Every man and woman who served and serves in our armed forces stood and stands up for Britain and the precious values and rights for which we have fought for generations: democracy, liberty and the rule of law. We are forever in debt to the brave souls who fought to defend this country—as the saying goes, freedom is not free. To all those serving, those who have served and those who have sacrificed, we say thank you.

Yesterday, thousands of people descended upon the Mall to watch all three services march in the excellent VE Day parade. I am sure the whole House will join me in paying tribute to everyone who took part, but especially to the veterans who made the occasion so special. Today, Her Majesty the Queen will visit the Tower of London to see the 30,000 poppies on display to mark and reflect the sacrifices made by so many in the second world war. Here in Parliament, there will be a celebratory concert in Westminster Hall, where the fantastic parliamentary choir will perform alongside some special guests. On VE Day itself, nearly 2,000 people, including Their Majesties the King and the Queen and a host of veterans, will mark the 80th anniversary with a special service at Westminster Abbey.

Olivia Bailey (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): In addition to the fantastic array of national events being held to mark VE Day and VJ Day, does the shadow Minister agree that we have some really fantastic community events in our constituencies, organised by local community groups—including Project Purley, which organised a fantastic celebration that I attended on Monday—which will give us a wonderful opportunity to celebrate and reflect on the contribution of those who fought for our freedoms?

Saqib Bhatti: The hon. Lady is absolutely right: it is the community events that really do define the day for me. She makes an excellent point, as I lead on to in my speech. Over the coming days, alongside the national events, thousands of people up and down the country will also commemorate this historic occasion with street parties, church services and concerts.

In my own constituency, we proudly remember our heroes. Every year in Meriden, in the very heart of England, hundreds of cyclists come to honour the cyclists who lost their lives in the first and second world wars. On Thursday, I will join the mayor of Solihull, who will be lighting a beacon at Elmdon church, and later in the week I will join Visit Knowle’s street party.

[Saqib Bhatti]

I pay special tribute to the *Solihull Observer*, which printed a special edition to commemorate VE Day, with stories of the heroes who come from my part of the world. These events, and many others across the country, truly show Britain at its very best.

In remembering the second world war, we must remember that our victory was forged on our relationships with not just our allies, but our friends in the Commonwealth. Troops came from many different nations and different faiths from across the world—Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh and others—to fight side by side, irrespective of their race or religion, and to stand up for the values that we all hold dear. Their common goal was to stand against tyranny and evil and to stand for freedom.

The conclusion of the second world war marked the end of the last major conflict in Europe until Putin's barbaric invasion of Ukraine. While we rightly celebrate the end of the second world war today, we must not forget the horrific and brutal conflict taking place in Europe. I am sure we were all moved by the Ukrainian troops taking part in yesterday's parade. It reflected our country's deep and profound commitment to their noble cause, and once more shows that this country will not stand by while brutal autocrats seek to impose themselves on Europe. While I am deeply proud of the St George's flag and the Union Jack, I am also proud of the Ukrainian flag, which has flown over council buildings across the UK as a reminder that this country will always stand up to bullies and come to the aid of those who stand for democracy and freedom.

Dave Robertson: I thank the shadow Minister for giving way—it is unusual for me to make two interventions in the same debate. Reflecting on my family's experience of the second world war, my taïd—my maternal grandfather, who was Welsh—fought in the war, but his war did not end in 1945. He did not come home until 1947, because he was part of the peacekeeping missions in both Italy and Greece. Does the shadow Minister agree that when we look at the situation in Ukraine, it is important that we remember Britain's role not just in winning the second world war, but in winning the peace, and how important that will be in the future?

Saqib Bhatti: I could not have put it better myself. The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point about the work that is happening now and will continue to happen going forward. If the House will indulge me, I also note that Reform's flag ban policy would also prevent council buildings from flying armed forces flags—a reminder that populism does not equal patriotism.

To conclude, in times of global uncertainty, reflecting on the second world war lends us some much-needed perspective. Remembering the history of the war and the causes of the war are absolutely essential, and I am hugely supportive of the Government's work to celebrate the anniversaries of VE Day and VJ Day. I look forward to Members' contributions.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Members will be able to see how many have risen to speak in this evening's debate, so there will be a four-minute time limit after the contributions from the Front Bench.

7.27 pm

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): As we mark the 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day and later this summer celebrate the anniversary of Victory over Japan Day, I am reminded of the extraordinary bravery shown by so many, including our very own Ray Statham, from Newhall, in my constituency. Eighty years ago, Ray was in the English channel supporting the D-day landings; now, as he approaches his 103rd birthday, we celebrate not only his longevity but the legacy of service he represents. Ray served aboard HMS Indefatigable with the Royal Navy, and I know the whole House will want to join me in wishing him a very happy birthday and offering him our deepest thanks for his service to our country. I would also like to recognise Ken Ash from Repton, who served with the Royal Signals, and my own grandad, Frederick, or Fred, Palmer, who served in the Royal Logistics Corps in the Army.

Winston Churchill said that the surrender of Nazi Germany was

“the signal for the greatest outburst of joy in the history of mankind”,

and while for many that was true, for countless others, the end of the war was marked by quiet sorrow for those who never came home. Across the UK and overseas, the graves of those who made the ultimate sacrifice are lovingly maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. We have one such war grave in Swadlincote, in Church Gresley cemetery. Thanks to Glyn Jackson and Joanne Abbassi, we have a folder of the names of those who rest in peace there. I am so grateful to Shelly Lynn, who leads tours of the cemetery, for sharing those names with me. I have written to the Secretary of State for Defence and to the Minister for Veterans and People with their names in a roll call, asking them to join me in sharing our gratitude for their service. Each of their names is a reminder of a family left behind, a future never fulfilled. What strikes me most is their youth. So many were in their early 20s, some just teenagers. They had dreams, careers and families ahead of them, and they gave all of that up for us. For me, this roll call carries an even more personal note. Many brave men and women served in the Royal Air Force as volunteer reserves. I have the privilege of taking part in the armed forces parliamentary scheme with the RAF this year, allowing me a small glimpse of the professionalism and sacrifice that defines our Royal Air Force personnel to this day.

As we commemorate VE Day and VJ Day, let us remember those who fought and fell not only in victory, but in hope, and let us resolve always to be worthy of the freedom that they gave us.

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

7.30 pm

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): On the eve of war, Liberal leader Archibald Sinclair warned:

“A policy which imposes injustice on a small and weak nation and tyranny on free men and women can never be the foundation of lasting peace.”

He was speaking about the Munich agreement, which saw European powers cede Czechoslovakian territory to Hitler. Nobody in this House would describe the

brave nation or the people of Ukraine as small and weak, but with the spectre of the dictator Vladimir Putin looming large on the eastern edge of Europe and President Trump threatening deals to carve up Ukrainian territory, Sinclair's words resonate today as they did then.

The wartime generation knew the cost of giving ground to tyrants, as they celebrated 80 years ago this week. The best way to honour those who fought for peace is to redouble our efforts to preserve it. Those people, together with today's serving personnel and veterans, carry forward the legacy of service inherited from that extraordinary wartime generation. In their memory, this anniversary must be a moment not just of reflection, but of a renewed sense of responsibility. This country is at its best when it works with its allies, not when it shrinks from the world.

This year is very likely the final big celebration for the veterans of world war two who are still with us. There are 360 names on Cheltenham's war memorial, and many civilians in my town also died in bombing raids. On VE Day, after six long years at war, people in my constituency and around the country took to the streets to celebrate. At Whaddon primary school, children waved Union Jack flags. People lined up outside the municipal offices in the town centre to hear Winston Churchill deliver his VE Day speech. An effigy of Adolf Hitler was burned. The celebrations reportedly ran well past midnight, which is rather late for a genteel Cotswolds spa town in the 1940s.

It is right that we in this House pause to remember the scale of the sacrifice and the legacy of the victory that that generation gave us. This anniversary is not simply about marking dates in a calendar, but a chance to say thank you to the dwindling number of surviving veterans and to all those who have served, suffered, and rebuilt.

Today I think of Lorna, a 105-year-old I recently met at St Ives Court in Cheltenham and very possibly my oldest constituent. She told me proudly about her contribution to the war effort as an intelligence analyst in Whitehall. I think of all those who served in the Gloucestershire Regiment and I think of my two grandfathers, both of whom served—one in the Navy and one in the RAF.

This anniversary is about ensuring that we continue to stand up for what they stood for. We must use this moment to recommit ourselves to the international co-operation and diplomacy that helped to deliver 80 years without a third world war. It is a peace that has been threatened by Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine. It is no coincidence that European unity was born from the ashes of the second world war. It has been the greatest peacebuilding project in history and, in the face of the threats that confront us today, we must once again stand shoulder to shoulder with our European allies. That means supporting NATO, standing up to aggression, and strengthening the rule of international law.

That does not mean, as some have callously suggested, that Ukraine should accept a deal to cede some of its territory to Putin. That would be a betrayal of the principles for which the wartime generation fought. That includes those who suffered in the far east. They have often received less recognition than those who served in Europe. The conflict there continued for nearly three months after VE Day, in punishing conditions and at immense human cost. Yet in too many

commemorations, their stories are not heard. We owe these individuals our deepest gratitude, and it is good that we are remembering them this VE Day. That gratitude to all those who have served must be expressed not just in words, but in action: action to defend our democracy; and action to defend the British values of liberty, tolerance and respect for the rule of law. Respecting our veterans means looking after them properly after their service is over—looking after their mental health, their housing, and their right to compensation.

This anniversary is not only about how we treat veterans, but about how we tell the story of the war and whose voices we include. The role of Commonwealth forces in securing victory is also often overlooked. Some 2.5 million Indian troops served in the second world war, many of them in the gruelling Burma campaign. Troops from Africa, the Caribbean, and across the Empire fought valiantly under British command. As a Liberal and an internationalist, I believe that we must be proud of them. It is only right that, today and this week, we recognise the contribution of our Commonwealth soldiers. Beyond the parades and ceremonies, we must embed this fuller history into our national consciousness, because remembrance without inclusion is incomplete.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): My constituency has the largest Commonwealth war graves site in the north of England. We regularly put on fantastic events throughout the year, including the Remembrance Sunday services and Christmas services. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating those involved for the fantastic work they do in making sure that we do not forget?

Max Wilkinson: Absolutely. The second-best spa town in the country, I am sure, celebrates VE Day wonderfully well.

This anniversary arrives at a time of renewed global instability. From Ukraine to the middle east, we are once again reminded that peace is fragile—that it cannot be taken for granted. The international order built in the aftermath of 1945 is under more strain than ever. The world is more dangerous than at any point since the cold war. Members in all parts of the House are so proud that many of our parliamentary colleagues have served in the armed forces, and we all stand with our armed forces.

Finally, I wish to express my party's strong support for the programme of national commemorations planned this year. We can all be very proud of what is happening. These events give us all a meaningful opportunity to reflect on the courage, resilience, and unity that defined the war effort, on the frontlines and on the home front alike. Let us mark this 80th anniversary not just with solemnity, but with resolve. Let us listen to the stories of those who served, from the soldiers to the evacuees, from the factory workers to the codebreakers, and let us make sure that every part of their legacy is carried forward. Let us honour them not just with words, but with action.

7.37 pm

Frank McNally (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): As with so many towns and villages across the UK, brave residents of my constituency, including my own grandparents, were involved in all aspects of the war

[Frank McNally]

effort. Our towns and villages answered the call for service—service that took so many forms. Early in the war, Coatbridge hosted the Polish 1st Field Artillery Regiment for a short time after the evacuation of France. So warm was the hospitality offered by the locals that the regiment later adopted Coatbridge as the mother garrison, and the town's coat of arms was emblazoned on their regimental standard.

Despite their own hardship and struggles, local people in my community and across the Monklands area engaged in whole raft of activities to support the war effort, including knitwear drives, charity concerts and cinema galas, to extend support not just for our own efforts, but to aid others, including the Russian Red Cross Society. Nowhere was that deep sense of common cause more apparent than in the support offered by the women in Coatbridge to the women of besieged Leningrad. I think those women would be frankly ashamed of the actions taken today by Putin in Ukraine.

When reflecting on these years, it is impossible not to think of our own families and the roles that they played alongside their neighbours and friends. They were ordinary people engaging in extraordinary acts. I think of how privileged I was to hear their stories and to reflect on those that went untold. I think of my maternal grandfather, Edwin Simpson, who fought with the RAF and whose wings I am privileged to carry with me today, along with his squadron photo taken at RAF Yatesbury in Wiltshire in 1944—a crew that spanned the country and the Commonwealth. I think of my paternal grandmother, Ethel McNally, who spent the war as a crane driver and was more than a little irked when after the war she was replaced by returning service personnel—something she never tired of shouting about.

The role of women has been well-discussed and will be throughout this debate. At the war's conclusion, the provost of Coatbridge town council recognised women for their role in the war effort in munitions and weapons factories, which were themselves dangerous environments. In the same message, the provost told of how the armed forces had saved the world for democracy, with their courage, steadfastness, tenacity and grit. Provost Pirie's tribute is all the more moving as he had lost his son Lieutenant Sydney Robertson Pirie of the 1st London Scottish Regiment just one month before VE Day.

The Minister mentioned parties, some of which lasted days in Bellshill and they were well documented locally. No level of gratitude can be enough to thank those who served and who died, including the hundreds whose names live on the memorials throughout my constituency, for the peace that they secured in 1945. We honour those who died and those who lived in that greatest generation. We commend their service and their sacrifice.

7.41 pm

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): At the outbreak of the second world war, the National Service (Armed Forces) Act 1939 introduced conscription for all men aged between 18 and 41. Like so many of his generation, my grandfather Harry Fry Davis Reed, born in Plymouth in 1913, received his call-up papers. On 20 June 1940, he reported for duty in Exeter. He joined the newly formed 12th Battalion of the Devonshire

Regiment, or the Devons. It was a battalion largely made up of conscripts serving for the duration of the war.

Just one month later, the Nazi bombing of Plymouth began, and the city he called home, where he had grown up, lived and worked, came under relentless attack. Friends, neighbours and fellow Plymothians were killed. Streets were destroyed, and entire communities were changed forever.

In the early years of the war, my grandfather helped defend the coastal areas of what is now my constituency of Exmouth and Exeter East. That knowledge speaks to me when I walk along local beaches at home. I often reflect on what it must have felt like to guard those shores under the threat of invasion, not knowing what would come next, only that you had to stand your ground.

By 1943, the 12th Battalion had been redesignated as a glider-borne infantry unit within the 6th Airborne Division. Their mission was to fly into combat aboard Horsa gliders, which were unarmoured, fragile aircraft made from wood and canvas. The thought of falling from the sky into enemy territory under fire in such vulnerable aircraft is almost unimaginable, but that is exactly what they did.

In 1944, my grandfather deployed to France for D-day. He left behind his young wife—my grandmother—and their two-year-old son, my father. While he went to war, his family remained under the shadow of the Luftwaffe as the bombing of Plymouth continued. Thousands more Plymothians would lose their lives. When Harry returned, it was to a city transformed by devastation and to a community that had endured untold suffering.

But the war was far from over. In March 1945, his battalion took part in Operation Varsity—the airborne crossing of the Rhine. To this day, it remains the largest airborne operation ever conducted on a single day in one location. In the final weeks of the war they reached northern Germany, just south of Wismar. There they maintained their kit, kept sharp and waited, not knowing what horrors lay ahead.

Victory in Europe was declared on 8 May 1945. The Devons were granted leave, and many attended a thanksgiving service in a nearby village. Relief no doubt filled the air, but the war's final chapter was still to be written. In the days that followed, they came face to face with the unimaginable: the atrocities of the Nazi concentration camps. Those images would no doubt remain etched in their minds forever.

I never had the chance to meet my grandfather, as he died many years before I was born, but I am deeply proud of him. His story, while personal, is not unique. That is exactly why I share it. Up and down our United Kingdom, families carry stories just like this—stories of ordinary people thrust into extraordinary circumstances, and stories of courage, endurance, loss and love. These stories are not rare; they are woven into the fabric of our nation.

Though I have served in the Royal Marines and experienced war myself, I still find it hard to truly comprehend what that generation went through. Their sacrifice, on a scale that few of us today can fully grasp, was made in the name of freedom, in defence of democracy, and in defiance of tyranny. It was a burden carried for

all of us. To that generation—our greatest generation—we owe a debt that can never truly be repaid. But we can remember, and we can honour, and we can ensure that their legacy lives on. Because of their courage, we have lived in peace. For that, I will always be grateful. We will remember them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I remind Members that there is a time limit on speeches.

7.45 pm

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): I am proud to speak in this debate on behalf of the home of the British Army. In Aldershot and Farnborough, VE Day and VJ Day are woven into the very fabric of our community. My words today have been shaped by constituents who have shared with me their memories and specialist knowledge, including Iris Munro, who told me her story as a 16-year-old celebrating VE Day in her home town of Aldershot, and Paul H. Vickers, a military historian who lives in Aldershot and who was a Ministry of Defence librarian for 40 years. I thank them for their help as I try to do the stories from our towns justice.

Aldershot stood at the very centre of the war effort. It was from its barracks and training grounds that thousands of brave men and women were prepared for service across Europe, north Africa and beyond. It was there that troops were forged, not just in skill but in spirit, and it was there that wounded soldiers found safety and solace in the Cambridge and Connaught hospitals.

My constituent Iris Munro, now 96, was the youngest of nine children, and every one of her family played a role—her four brothers fighting across the globe in the European and far eastern theatres, and her father, mother and sisters active on the home front. She vividly remembers the terror of sleeping under the stairs as Aldershot was bombed, and how Lord Haw-Haw singled out the town as he tried to demoralise the population. She also recalls the town's defiance and spirit of resistance, as she sang "There'll always be an England" to entertain her neighbours when they sought cover in the dirt-floored underground shelters as the air raid warning sirens wailed overhead.

Aldershot gave the allied campaign strength in its most literal sense, playing a vital role in the preparation for the D-day landings and serving as a hub for Canadian troops, more than 320,000 of whom passed through its gates during the war. Farnborough was the beating heart of Britain's aeronautical innovation. The Royal Aircraft Establishment based there became a crucible of scientific brilliance. It was in Farnborough that engineers and researchers developed the technologies that gave our pilots superiority in the skies, including radar, advanced aircraft design, and aerodynamics. It was a battle fought not with rifles but with calculations and courage, and it helped tilt the balance in the air towards the allies. Farnborough proved that war could be won not only with force but innovation.

On 8 May, when news of Germany's surrender reached Aldershot, the town was united in joyful celebration. Fairy lights were hung in a "V for victory" formation on the fronts of homes. A pipe band from a Canadian unit led a spontaneous parade, with hundreds linking arms and singing. Iris remembers singing with friends from

her youth club, right at the front of the parade, with her mum proudly waving from the sidelines. In Farnborough, a grand dance took place at the Royal Aircraft Establishment assembly hall. The music did not stop until 3 o'clock in the morning. It was not just a celebration—it was release. A lifetime's worth of tension and fear was finally let go in laughter, in dance and in community.

Among those joyful scenes, we also have to remember the personal stories. I was honoured to meet Norman "Norrie" Bartlett on Remembrance Day in Yateley last year. He sadly passed away this March. He joined the Navy in 1942, under age at just 16, and suffered the extreme cold and danger of both the Arctic and the Atlantic. I am pleased to say that he was well enough, having seen both D-day landings and the Japanese surrender, to make it to Normandy for the 80th anniversary—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. My apologies for not noticing the time; I was being disturbed by the Whip.

7.50 pm

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): Driving around my beautiful constituency, it is hard to tell that the area played such a pivotal role in the second world war. Only one active military base remains on the site of the old RAF Driffield at Kelleythorpe, which is now used by cadets and occasionally for other training. Back in the 1940s, the countryside of East Yorkshire was littered with airfields. The area played a vital role in taking the air war to Germany. I do not have time to go into detail about each base, but I will do my best to give the House a whistlestop tour.

RAF Bridlington was made up of a number of units, including air gunnery schools, initial training wings, air-sea rescue and a marine craft unit. Just to the north, RAF Bampton was established as a radar station, becoming part of the Chain Home Low network. RAF Cottam near Driffield was a satellite base that was used only occasionally for flying and mostly as a bomb storage site. RAF Cowden to the south of Hornsea was an RAF bombing range. We are occasionally reminded of its past when bomb disposal teams are called in to deal with ordnance unearthed by the fast-eroding coastline.

RAF Hutton Cranswick was developed as a fighter base with many Spitfire squadrons passing through. It was used not only by the RAF but by the Royal Canadian Air Force and several Polish fighter squadrons. RAF Catfoss near Brandesburton had a small number of Spitfires and trained strike aircraft crews for operations in north Africa and the middle east. Huggate wold was surveyed for a bomber base, but a better location was found nearby. However, a pop-up airstrip was created at Huggate wold with steel mesh, as it was required for the invasion of Europe.

It is Bomber Command that has perhaps left its legacy in East Yorkshire. With its proximity to Germany, the area was home to hundreds of aircraft and crewed by men undertaking some of the most dangerous missions of the war in the skies over continental Europe. RAF Full Sutton, RAF Lissett and RAF Driffield were home to many of those bomber crews: Halifax bombers, Wellington bombers and others. The 158 Squadron based at

[Charlie Dewhurst]

RAF Lissett lost 144 aircraft in just two years, costing the lives of 851 airmen. They are remembered by a fantastic memorial on the Gransmoor Road just outside the village.

It was not just bomber air bases. We had RAF Carnaby near Bridlington, which was a particularly important military asset as it was one of only three emergency landing strips in the country. It was 2.7 km long and 230 metres wide—five times the normal width. More than 1,500 bombers made emergency landings at Carnaby during the war, including the Dambusters, who landed there with their grand slam bombs still on board when they were diverted due to bad weather over their targets in Germany.

While the RAF played a vital role in my constituency, the infantrymen of the East Yorkshire Regiment also served with distinction throughout the war. Their battalions served at Dunkirk and in India, Burma, north Africa and Sicily before landing in the first wave on Gold beach on D-day. Despite many casualties on that first day, they achieved all their objectives and fought on through Normandy and all the way to Germany. Our area also has a French connection as a number of regiments from the Free French army were based at Hornsea under General Leclerc.

I am delighted to have had the brief opportunity to highlight East Yorkshire's rich wartime history, but I also want to pay tribute to all my constituents currently serving in the armed forces and to the 5,000 veterans living in the local area. Whether in Normandy or Northern Ireland, on land, air or sea: on the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Europe, we thank you for your service and your sacrifice.

7.54 pm

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): Eighty years ago, Britain celebrated victory in Europe. The war was over, although the real achievement was not just the military triumph but the extraordinary effort that got us there: the unity, the resolve and the national determination to stand up to fascism and defend freedom and democracy. I have thought about that a lot over the years, listening to my grandad share memories of his time as a commando during the Italian campaign, as I watched my dad leave home to go to the first Gulf war, and again as I served in Afghanistan. The message of VE Day has stayed with me. Victory is not just about those serving; it is about the whole country behind them.

When I was in Afghanistan, we faced daily attacks from rockets, snipers and mortar fire. Those moments still come back to me, but I remember just as clearly how our fight on the frontline relied on so many others. During that time, we lost many good soldiers and marines tragically, but we learned: our tactics changed and military surgeons developed new procedures. The same innovation was happening back home, where our engineers were designing mine-resistant vehicles, better body armour and equipment to jam radio-controlled explosives. That innovation saved lives. In Ukraine, where I was last month, the same is happening right now. The Ukrainian defence industry has gone into overdrive to engineer the kit that will help save it from Russian aggression.

There is no denying that we live in increasingly dangerous times. War is raging on our continent. Eighty years on from VE Day, the idea of a lasting peace in Europe is a fading reality. That is why I support the Government's plans to raise defence spending to 2.5% of GDP, not because it sounds tough, but because it is necessary. However, if we are truly serious about security, we must go further than just raising the budget. We must ensure that spending builds strength at home.

In 1945, it was British industry in shipyards, foundries and engineering firms that turned the war effort around. HMS Catterick—the ship my grandad served on before he landed at Salerno—was built in Barrow shipyard. Industrial heartlands like the Black Country made tanks, armoured cars, weapons and ammunition. Those places did not just support the war; they made victory possible.

Today the Black Country still has the talent, the tools and the tradition. Somers Forge in Halesowen produces vital equipment for the Royal Navy and B. B. Price in Cradley Heath has been forging parts for ships, tanks and aircraft for generations. They are not relics of the past; they are the backbone of the future defence industry, because deterrence starts long before the first shots are fired.

As we are seeing in Ukraine, a strong and capable military is essential to deterring our enemies. This VE Day, as we honour those who served and sacrificed, we also have a duty to ask what country we are building today. Are we ready for the challenges ahead? Are we investing in the skills, industries and infrastructures that kept us free 80 years ago? We owe it to that generation and to the next to be bold, to rebuild our strength at home so we can face threats abroad and to remember that Britain's security has always rested not just on the courage of its troops but on the quiet determination of the people and places that back them. That spirit of 1945—unity, purpose and resilience—is not a memory; it is a blueprint. It is time that we followed it again.

7.57 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): In 1945, after six long years of hardship, sacrifice and loss, peace returned to a continent torn apart by conflict. When the news broke in Mid Sussex—in our towns and in our villages—people gathered for street parties, shared cups of tea at “bring your own cup” celebrations, held thanksgiving services and lit bonfires that could be seen for miles. There was joy, yes, but there was also reflection, for while victory brought peace, it could never undo the human cost.

I recently met a wonderful charity working hard to highlight the work of a specific group during the war: the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit, who were an essential part of the war effort. Among those who served and died in the PRU was William Comber, a constituent of Mid Sussex at that time. Flight Lieutenant William Edward Comber, the son of William and Emma Comber, was born in Cuckfield. On joining the RAF, he was posted to 680 Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron, operating in the Mediterranean. He was taken ill on 5 December 1943 and was taken to the No. 63 general hospital in Salonika, Greece, where, despite the use of an iron lung, he died of polio on 10 December. We thank him, and I ask the Minister to support a national memorial to the Photo Reconnaissance Unit. We also thank the countless others who served and gave everything for their country.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): My constituent, James Hares, was one of the brave pilots in the same unit. Despite the unit having a death rate of about 48%—one of the worst of the war—he survived, only to sadly pass away on the journey home. We have heard from so many colleagues already how those stories are largely untold and how many people did crucial work in helping to win the war—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. If Members are going to get in during this debate, interventions need to be interventions and not mini-speeches.

Alison Bennett: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention and for her additional insight into the work of the PRU. Coming from an Army family—the kind that took me, aged seven in 1984, on a tour of the D-day beaches as a holiday—we remember our war dead. Our war dead must be remembered, and doing so matters to me. Their strength and sacrifice paved the way for the freedoms we enjoy today. That is why this anniversary matters. It is not just a historical milestone, but a powerful reminder of the values that we must continue to uphold: courage, unity, resilience and an unshakeable belief in the importance of peace.

It is fantastic that Mid Sussex is once again coming together to commemorate VE Day in the same spirit shown all those years ago: from a reflective service at the Burgess Hill war memorial to community street parties and parades. With the lighting of beacons in Victoria Park in Haywards Heath and St John's Park in Burgess Hill, this anniversary will be marked with pride, with dignity and, I know, with heart. VE Day is not just about looking back; it is about reminding ourselves of what was fought for—freedom, democracy and peace—and about recognising how vital it is that we protect those values today.

Sadly, we live in a world that still faces conflict and uncertainty. There are dark, divisive forces that seek to disrupt peace, incite hatred and push to the side the lessons that were learned 80 years ago. So on this 80th anniversary, let us remember, let us honour and, above all, let us ensure that the legacy of those who gave everything lives on—not just in our words but in our actions.

8.1 pm

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I am privileged to speak in this debate today after so many powerful speeches from colleagues across the House. I am also glad to have the chance to draw particular attention to the people of Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy, and the special role that my constituents and their forefathers played in securing victory for the allies. The Fife and Forfar Yeomanry was present at many of the second world war's most crucial turning points, from the Dunkirk evacuation in 1940 to the Normandy landings in 1944 and the crossing of the Rhine in March 1945. Hundreds of young men lost their lives, and we will remember them.

I draw attention to the enormous contribution that women made to the war effort. Having entered the workforce en masse in Kirkcaldy's world-famous linoleum industry during the first world war, the contribution to the second world war effort by Kirkcaldy's women was invaluable. Women working at Nairn's manufactured fuel tanks for Halifax bombers, and their biggest contribution was to anti-gas fabric for capes and gas

masks. Such quantities could only be produced in Kirkcaldy, and that was a decisive factor in the allied victory, as the Nazis could not manufacture gas-proof textiles in sufficient quantities and so never used gas in air raids for fear of retaliation. One of the most iconic symbols of Britain's war effort—and, indeed, its lack of use—are therefore testament to the hard graft of Fifers, particularly our wartime women.

Adding to their contribution were the thousands of Poles in the 1st Independent Parachute Brigade, stationed at Auchtertool in my constituency, who helped to fortify Scotland's east coast and set up anti-tank barriers and pillboxes from Burntisland all the way up to Montrose, accompanying the fortifications on the island of Inchcolm in the Forth. The regiment later went into battle in Operation Market Garden in the Netherlands in 1944. General Sikorski, the leader of the Polish Government in exile, had a house in Auchtertool as well, and I found a quote from Winston Churchill as he updated this very House on the death of General Sikorski in July 1943:

“Until the moment of his death he lived in the conviction that all else must be subordinated to the needs of the common struggle and in the faith that a better Europe will arise”.—[*Official Report*, 6 July 1943; Vol. 390, c. 1947.]

Many Poles made their homes in my constituency after world war two and they are an important part of our community today.

The memory of those who fought in both world wars and all others, and in particular of those who did not make it home, is kept alive by the fantastic work of the Kirkcaldy Legion. Its work alongside the Kirkcaldy United Services Institute and the Hill of Beath Ex-servicemens Club in my constituency supports veterans in our area. I am also glad of the work that our Labour Government are putting in to support our veterans and their families.

I commemorate the contribution of my granny, Isa McCue, who served in a munitions factory, and my grandad, Sam Ward, who served in the RAF during world war two. Civilians before the war, like so many, they stepped up to secure our freedom. In the face of the challenges in our own day and age, in this debate and on the 80th anniversary of VE Day on Thursday, we commemorate real people who worked, who served and who gave their lives for freedom and prosperity in the face of immense challenges. They are, after all, the reason we are here today.

8.5 pm

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): What an excellent speech to have the privilege of following.

It is always so impressive when people do their duty right up to the very end, and so I ask the House to salute the passing of Normandy veteran Cecil Newton, who as recently as last year came back to Lepe beach in New Forest East and read out the names of more than a hundred of his comrades in the Royal Dragoon Guards who were killed in the D-day landings and beyond. He was one of 6,000 troops who landed on Gold beach, having departed from Lepe beach. He was in an amphibious Sherman tank that made it to shore—not all of them did—and he survived being wounded in combat too, passing at the great age of 101.

We have heard from many speakers about the connections between their constituencies and the military history of the second world war. That was a theme on which

[Sir Julian Lewis]

I expatiated back in May 1997 in my very first speech in this House. I will repeat just one reference from that oration, about when I discovered a small plot of RAF graves in Fawley churchyard in my constituency. I could not help but be moved by the inscription on the headstone of a young airman, John Burrow, whose parents had written the following:

“Into the mosaic of victory we lay this priceless piece—our son”.

I thought that that was such a wonderful thing to do in the depths of their loss: to say, nevertheless, that this is what we are doing for the victory of our country over Nazi Germany. I salute them and their memory too.

How does one do justice to the second world war in a few minutes? I will pick out one key factor without which everything else would have been different: the existence of the English channel. There can be no doubt that if we had been contiguous with the continent of Europe, we would have suffered the same fate as all our allies there. There is no way in which we could have resisted being overrun. When we think about how difficult it was to reinvade and retake the continent for democracy in 1944, even with Britain as the launch area for that invasion, we realise how virtually impossible it would have been without the United Kingdom remaining outside Nazi German control.

We can also look at the areas covered by a simple listing of the campaign stars that were awarded: the Atlantic Star, the Africa Star, the Italy Star, the Burma Star, the Pacific Star, the France and Germany Star and, much belatedly, the Arctic Star for the brave men of the merchant navy and the Royal Navy, who risked everything to get supplies to Russia.

Let us not forget one last thing. When the war ended, the country for which we went to war, Poland, remained under occupation by the Soviet Union, and it took another 44 years of determined deterrence, coupled with the nuclear balance of terror, to ensure the eventual emergence of democracy in that country too.

8.10 pm

Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this debate to honour the sacrifice our communities made during the second world war, and to celebrate the victory of democracy over tyranny. I began the week of VE Day by paying my respects at Hawkinge cemetery in my constituency. There are 96 British military personnel buried there, mostly airmen who made the ultimate sacrifice during world war two. Those airmen would have flown from RAF Hawkinge, part of which is now the site of the Battle of Britain Museum in Kent, housing the world's largest collection of battle of Britain memorabilia. I urge all Members of this House to visit it if they get the chance.

RAF Hawkinge was the nearest Royal Air Force station to enemy-occupied France. The nearest Luftwaffe fighters in Calais were just six minutes' flying time away. As a result, the air force base and the villages in the surrounding area became a regular target for Luftwaffe bombs. With the areas around Dover and Folkestone also being subjected to long-range cross-channel shelling from German artillery batteries stationed along the French coast, it is little wonder that the area soon became known as “hellfire corner”.

After the battle of Britain, RAF Hawkinge continued to play a vital role throughout the war, with British, Commonwealth and other allied pilots flying bomber escorts, reconnaissance and intruder missions from there. Indeed, Hawkinge played a pivotal part as a frontline fighter station in 1944 against Hitler's V1 flying bombs. Operation Diver was the code name given to the RAF strategy to intercept and destroy V1 flying bombs before they reached London. RAF Hawkinge's location and its proximity to Nazi-occupied France meant it was used as a forward base for fighter aircraft to save countless lives by intercepting the flying bombs before they reached the capital. Despite the variety of planes that flew from RAF Hawkinge during the war years, it is the Spitfire that has a particularly close connection with the aerodrome.

Turning to another part of my constituency, Ashford railway works was a prime target for German bombers during the war. Around 4,000 air raid alerts were sounded, and bombs fell regularly in the area around the railway works. Although there were many fatalities as a result of these bombing raids, the most devastating took place on 24 March 1943. On this day, an air raid that lasted around three minutes resulted in the deaths of 52 civilians and one RAF pilot on the ground. A further 78 people were seriously injured. Although the railway works was the main target, the surrounding areas were also badly hit.

During the raid a bomb fell on Beaver Road primary school. Thankfully, the sirens sounded in time and the children managed to get into the playground shelters. As a parent, I dread to imagine the panic and fear this bomb caused. It is little wonder, therefore, that long before the all-clear sounded, parents rushed to the school to find out what had happened to their children. When they got there, they found that, thankfully, they were unharmed. The headteacher, Miss Adams, received an award for her actions on that day, which ultimately saved the lives of the children.

I am pleased to have had the opportunity to speak in this debate to recognise the sacrifices made throughout Ashford, Hawkinge and the villages, and to honour the legacy of all those who lived during world war two. We should recognise that it is our duty today to continue to uphold the values they sacrificed so much for.

8.14 pm

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): Eighty-five years ago, we saw the forces of fascism rise up to threaten democracy and freedom in Europe—forces of darkness that would seek to control, oppress, subjugate and exploit the people of these islands if they prevailed. But they did not prevail. We owe our current reality to the bravery and heroism of those who gave their lives in order that we may maintain the way in which we continue to live our lives.

In Scotland, generations were lost and villages and towns were hollowed out of their breeding-age men who were barely men at all, often in their productive prime, who were sent to die in a foreign, distant place among the deafening and unrelenting roar of mechanised warfare, seeing their friends and neighbours die and drawing their own last breath desperate for a kind word, a mother's soothing touch or an absent reassurance before a short life slammed shut. It was a far cry from the cheerful “Boy's Own” adventure “We'll be home soon.” Nobody got home soon.

Many did not return at all, and many of those who did would never be the same again, because that is how it is with wars in the past. There was a legitimate desire to lock it away in a box, out of sight, which was nice if they could manage it, but many could not. Many families saw the slow heartbreak of husbands who were irreparably damaged—either physically or psychologically—and the distant, silent fathers who returned, never quite able to access the men they were before the war.

Total war has a long tail, and it is still visible on these islands 80 years later in society and the economy. Indeed, the war debt to the United States was fully repaid only in 2006. If the war stores had not been evacuated from Coventry to the Perthshire hills between Almondbank and Methven, I would not have got a job there in 1989, and I can guarantee that if I had not worked for the Ministry of Defence, I would not be standing here today.

Scotland stood tall in those darkest of times militarily, economically, industrially and culturally, just like our neighbours in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and in Norway, Denmark and the low countries. Scotland's shipbuilding, coalmining, locomotive manufacturing, agricultural output and production of steel were all pivotal to the war effort. While young men fought, an army of older men and women toiled in the factories and the fields, equipping those at home and those in peril defending their homeland.

Scotland's industry and geography made it a target for the Luftwaffe. The first aerial combat above the United Kingdom in the second world war happened in the Firth of Forth, where the Luftwaffe targeted Royal Navy ships anchored off Rosyth. While London's horrendous blitz raged on for eight long months, towards the end of that period the Clydebank blitz lasted just two nights, but on those two nights in March 1941, the Luftwaffe killed 1,200 civilians, injured a further 1,000 civilians and destroyed 8,500 homes in that town.

Eighty-five years ago in Europe, we saw the forces of fascism rise up to threaten our freedom. Then the superior forces of freedom and liberty rose higher still to crush fascism down where it belongs. Eighty years after the end of that war, autocracies are still alive and well in our world today. To honour those who paid for our freedom with their own lives, we must remain forever alert to the fragility of our freedoms. We owe them all so much, and the absolute least that we can do to acknowledge their selfless sacrifice is to never, ever forget that liberty and vigilance go hand in hand.

8.18 pm

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): This week I am privileged to be attending events across the constituency to commemorate the 80th anniversary of VE day and the sacrifices of those who fought in the second world war, including veterans such as David Edwards and Tom Griffiths, who have a school named after them in Mondrainville in France, having helped to liberate the village. In Monmouthshire, we will also be reflecting on the 110th anniversary of the second battle of Ypres, when the 3rd Battalion the Monmouthshire Regiment suffered almost 700 casualties. Monmouthshire veterans and the Abergavenny Royal British Legion will unveil a new commemorative bench to mark both that event and VE Day on Thursday.

While we take time to remember those who have served in decades gone by, it is also extremely important to remember those who have committed to serving now and recently in our armed forces, and give recognition to their contribution to our national security and peace. Monmouthshire boasts a fantastic armed forces community because of its strong sense of camaraderie and support. We have a vibrant Royal British Legion presence in Abergavenny, Caldicot, Chepstow, Monmouth and Usk, as well as cadet groups across the county. There are so many people I could name who are involved in that work, but I pay tribute in particular to Peter Farthing, who was recognised this year for his outstanding contribution to the Abergavenny Royal British Legion. He works tirelessly for veterans across Monmouthshire from remembrance services to fundraising and welfare support.

I am so glad and thankful that this Government are committed to strengthening support for our veterans and armed forces community. Veterans today can face serious challenges and they deserve the greatest level of respect for their service and the many sacrifices they have made in its course, and that extends to the families who support them. I am proud that this Government will put the armed forces covenant fully into law to strengthen support for serving personnel and veterans, and to ensure that everyone who has served or continues to serve and their families are treated with fairness and respect.

In attending commemoration events this week, all of us across the House will remember and recognise the bravery of those who fought in the second world war—both those who saw VE Day and those who tragically did not. We must also remember those who have served each day since then from 1945 right up to the present day. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to all those who have served and who continue to serve our great country and who allow us to live in peace.

8.21 pm

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I look forward to marking VE Day on Thursday in the Royal Burgh of Sanquhar, which is part of Upper Nithsdale's proud military heritage, at the beacon to be lit at Hass hill in Lockerbie, and at a parade in Dumfries on Saturday. What Ministers and yourself, Madam Deputy Speaker, might not know is that the end of the war in Europe was first announced in Dumfries, because the Provost Fyfe jumped the gun and announced it at 12 pm. Local newspaper reports are clear that by the time Churchill made the official announcement at 3 pm—despite the pouring rain—the party was well under way in Dumfries.

I want to reference two individuals who are strongly related to the war but at different ends of the spectrum. The first is Air Chief Marshal Lord Hugh Dowding, who was born in Moffat. Lord Dowding is the man who masterminded the battle of Britain, and it is generally accepted that he played a crucial role in ensuring that Hitler's Operation Sea Lion—the proposal to invade this island—did not succeed. He was a tactical genius who knew how to manage the RAF resource and ensured there were detailed preparations for the air defences.

[David Mundell]

The other person is David Shankland MBE. He was a great character in my local community when I was growing up. Davie, like a lot of people, was involved in an incident that was not an attack by the enemy but a ship carrying munitions that blew up in Bombay harbour. That ship—the SS Fort Stikine—blew up and took down the ship that Davie was on, El Hind, as well. About 1,300 people perished in that incident, and Davie was one of only six people on his vessel to survive. He took that as a message that he needed to dedicate the rest of his life to public service, and that is what he did. When he was demobbed, he became a nurse. He was the first male state-registered nurse in the south of Scotland, and he went on to be a distinguished nurse tutor. That is the sort of impact the war had: people going through it and making it a positive experience.

I also want to mention my mother Dorah. She was 13 when the war began, but as soon as she was 18 in 1944, she volunteered and became an Army cook, going from rural south Scotland to Norfolk. Her abiding memory of the war was D-day. Having cooked the night before for a full and overflowing canteen, she said she went in the next morning and there were only four old men to serve. My aunt, who remained in the south of Scotland, had to work on the farm. She was 19 and worked throughout the war as a farm labourer because, as others have referenced, there just were not men to do that. We pay tribute to those people, even if they did not have a formal role.

The final point, which I am pleased that a number of Members have raised, is VJ Day. The King's Own Scottish Borderers from the south of Scotland were heavily involved in the eastern campaign. People never really felt that they got the acknowledgment they deserved, because they felt that the war had ended and yet it had not.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We still have a number of Members trying to get in, so we will set the speaking limit at three minutes.

8.25 pm

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): VE Day, especially this year, offers us a chance to reflect with gratitude on the sacrifices made by those in the armed forces and those on the home front to defend our way of life and freedoms from tyranny. A few weeks ago, I had the pleasure of visiting Thurrock museum's exhibition marking the 80th anniversary of victory in Europe, and it takes its jumping-off point from a picture taken at the time of a VE Day celebration in Grays. Visitors are invited to look at the joy on people's faces and the celebrations—children dancing spontaneously, bunting up in the streets, cakes being served—but also to reflect on what is going on behind the picture: the fact that people in those photos would be awaiting the return of loved ones for some months and may be waiting for loved ones who were never to return. Also, visitors are encouraged to reflect on the extraordinary sacrifice of those on the home front and the changes it made to their way of life.

I took a moment to pause on some of the lyrics sung by Vera Lynn. We often think of them as upbeat, patriotic and bringing us all together, but looking behind the words of

“There'll be bluebirds over

The white cliffs of dover”

she speaks about a return to normality. When she sings,

“And Jimmy will go to sleep

In his own little room again”

we can only think what that meant every evening when those sirens went off for parents to take their children down to an air raid shelter, wondering if they would ever emerge and what they would be emerging to. While it was a moment for celebration, it was also a moment perhaps to reflect on the great loss and sacrifice that people made.

At the exhibition, there is a set-up made to look like a VE Day celebration, and they have photos of those who might have been round the table. We are allowed to explore the stories of 10 extraordinary Thurrock residents and the lives they led during the war. I would like to highlight two that stood out to me: Charles Corder from South Stifford, a RAF navigator who was awarded the medal for conspicuous gallantry; and Vera Robertson, a civilian from Little Thurrock who assisted the Norwegian resistance by sheltering them at her flat in Norway.

The war definitely changed the course of people's lives, and it also brought about social change. I would like to touch briefly on the fact that VE Day marked the return of over 300,000 disabled servicemen and women—something that led to the first ever piece of legislation considering the needs of disabled people. The war did act as a catalyst to change and learn. In that spirit, I hope that by commemorating the anniversary this year—one of our very last chances to join with those who served—we take a moment to learn lessons and the values of hope and freedom over evil and tyranny; to pledge to honour the values that those great servicemen and women fought to protect; to learn from the bravery, courage, compassion and sacrifice of those on the home front to face down hatred and division in our society; to support those in need; and to champion the values that bring us together as a nation.

8.28 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Like many of my generation, I have a grandfather who served in the second world war. Though I was never old enough to ask him about it before he passed away, I was always very proud to have a relative who had taken part. I was proud that he had served in the Desert Rats during the north African campaign, and I was honoured to follow in his footsteps when I served in the 7th Armoured Brigade, the Desert Rats, during operations in Iraq 65 years later.

The second world war left an indelible mark on our nation. Its impact ripples throughout so much of our culture, heritage and identity. I am certain that it had a huge influence on my interest in the military, which led to my own desire to serve. My former regiment, the Duke of Wellington's, saw action in France, Tunisia, Italy, India and Burma, and battle honours at Anzio in the Italian campaign and at Sittang bridge in Burma,

operating as Chindits behind Japanese lines at Imphal and Kohima. These campaigns played a crucial role in securing victory over Nazi Germany and imperial Japan.

My Huntingdon constituency played a key role throughout the war. RAF Molesworth opened in 1941, with the royal Australian air force's 460 Squadron operating Wellington bombers. After 460 departed, the United States army air force soon arrived and is most closely linked with the 303rd Bomb Group, popularly known as "Hell's Angels", arriving with B-17s in September 1942. It launched the first US army air force bombing raid over Nazi-occupied Europe later that year. The US air force remains at RAF Molesworth to this day and is still embedded in the local community across Huntingdon.

RAF Wyton was also a key player as the home of the Pathfinder Force from 1942. The Pathfinder Force was an elite unit, tasked with leading RAF Bomber Command's night-time raids deep into the skies over Germany and locating the target at a time when night-time bombing was suffering from poor results, with targets being missed. That role was not without risk. From 1942 to 1945, the Pathfinder Force flew a total of 50,490 sorties against some 3,440 targets, and at least 3,727 members were killed on operations. The activity at RAF Molesworth and RAF Wyton is a significant reminder of the vital role the RAF played but also of the sacrifice and work of our allies and US personnel throughout the war.

To conclude, I pay tribute to all those who did so much so that we can live freely. They were normal people asked to do things that nobody should have to—make incredible sacrifices, endure terrible suffering and experience tragic losses. The second world war was a defining moment in our nation's history, more so than any event in living memory. As those who experienced it pass and the first-hand memories are lost, it is easy to forget what was done by so many, but we must never forget, and we will remember them.

8.30 pm

Elaine Stewart (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): On VE Day, Captain Harry Richardson of the RAF, from Ochiltree in Ayrshire, was half a world away. VE Day did not mean the end of all conflict. The war with Japan continued, and despite extensive service in Europe, Captain Richardson was still on active duty in India as a bomber pilot. While the country celebrated, Captain Richardson and many others fought on to keep the peace. He flew 62 bombing missions over Germany, Europe, Burma and Malaysia until 1947, when Japan surrendered. Leaving the RAF as a flight lieutenant, he earned the Distinguished Flying Cross, the war Star, the Air Crew Europe medal, the Burma Star and the Defence medal.

This year, Captain Richardson celebrated his 107th birthday and will travel to London for the VE Day commemorations. Not all veterans reach 107, so it is also important to pay tribute to those who have fallen. This week I will visit "Untold Stories", an exhibition at Girvan library, where Richard and Loran Conaghan of the Girvan and District Great War Project present local stories from the war, aiming to inspire our younger generation.

One story is of Corporal Norman Nicholson Campbell. He joined the Pioneer Corps, leaving behind his wife Mary and four-year-old son Malcolm. In Dunkirk, 1940, Norman was taken as a prisoner of war to Stalag VIII B

in Lamsdorf, Poland. By August 1940, his wife had passed away from cancer, and eight months later, his son died. Corporal Campbell died of a cardiac arrest in 1943, two years before VE Day, and was laid to rest in Krakow in 1948. This story is a stark reminder of the sacrifices made by so many and their loved ones during the war. As we celebrate VE Day 80 years on, it is right to remember everyone who made that possible. We thank them.

8.33 pm

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): Eighty years ago, when the guns fell silent, the long and bitter war against tyranny in Europe was over. Britain's peace was marked by not only celebration, but gratitude and reflection on all that had been sacrificed to make it possible. That peace had been fully and faithfully earned across my constituency, with courage, with resolve and at great cost. From every corner of the constituency, men and women stepped forward to serve, in the air, at sea, on the frontline and at home. Their names are etched into memorials across our communities to remind us of not only who they were, but what they gave.

Brecknockshire, with its long-standing military tradition, stood as a proud centre of that service, but the uniform was worn across the constituency, in the hills of Radnorshire, in the valleys of Cwm Tawe and beyond. Among them were those who served with distinction in local regiments such as the South Wales Borderers and the Welch Regiment, both of which saw action across Europe, north Africa and the far east.

The Royal Navy also bore our town's name with pride. HMS Brecon, a Hunt-class destroyer, served with honour in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, carrying the name of Brecon wherever she sailed. Others served in different ways but with equal resolve. In the Swansea valley, local men were conscripted as Bevin boys, sent into the deep and dangerous seams of the south Wales coalfield to mine the coal that powered our fleets and fuelled the wartime economy. Their work was exhausting and often overlooked, but vital to victory. Many of them were not released until 1948.

In the fields of my constituency, the rhythms of farming did not cease. Amid rationing and relentless shortages, Welsh agricultural workers, and the Land Girls who stood beside them, kept the nation fed. Across the constituency, women took on vital responsibilities in munitions factories, hospitals, civil defence, and at the heart of their communities. Their contribution was lasting. It shaped the peace that followed, and the freedoms we live by today. I was proud to attend the commemorations last Saturday in Ystradgynlais, organised by Jade and the Swansea Valley armed forces club, where that contribution was honoured. Let our remembrance be a promise: to live up to their example, to work together for the public good, and never to forget what was given in the hope of a fairer future. Finally, I wish to pay tribute to RAF war veteran John Gwynne, who was a worthy guest of honour at recent VE Day celebrations in Talgarth, aged 104.

8.35 pm

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): Before reflecting on the anniversary itself, I wish to pay tribute to the Royal British Legion and its volunteers. I have a dickie bow

[Tim Roca]

that the Bollington branch of the legion, one of the oldest in the country, has kindly given me, and I will be wearing it with pride on Thursday, along with other RBL volunteers across the wider Cheshire area, and indeed the country. We owe them a debt of gratitude for their dedication, which is a living legacy of service.

During the war, communities across Macclesfield answered the call to duty. Mills and factories pivoted to produce essential war materiel, from uniforms to parachutes and engine components, helping to sustain our armed forces. Thousands of the iconic Lancaster bombers were assembled at Woodford aerodrome, and on the frontlines, the Cheshire regiment served with distinction from the deserts of north Africa to the bloody hills of Italy and the beaches of Normandy. Cheshire soldiers were at the heart of the fight to liberate Europe, and their bravery and sacrifice was part of the great national effort that we are talking about today.

In the air, RAF pilots from Macclesfield also did their bit. Eric Bann was a member of the Macclesfield aeronautical society, joining the RAF at the outbreak of the war. He went on to fly 60 missions. He was in the thick of the action from the outset. He was shot down in the channel in July 1940, yet he still managed to get back to the air, downing a Messerschmitt and a Heinkel in the following weeks. On 28 September his Hurricane was attacked while patrolling over the Isle of Wight. Witnesses saw his plane ablaze before he bailed out. Tragically, his parachute failed to open. His death was front-page news in the *Macclesfield Courier*, which praised him as

“a glorious example of courage, gameness and determination.”

Even with victory, the cost was staggering: 400,000 lives lost, cities bombed, homes destroyed. Economically, the war left our country exhausted, and psychologically, as Members have pointed out, the trauma ran deep for those who fought, those who waited, and those who mourned.

As we meet here today, war once again strides across our continent, with the invasion of Ukraine by Russia bringing back scenes that we hoped never to see—cities in ruins, civilians targeted, millions displaced. It is a bitter reminder that peace cannot be taken for granted, that the values we fought for are still under threat, and that tyranny unchecked only grows bolder. VE Day is not just a day of remembrance; it is a call for resolve, and a reminder that we in Macclesfield, and across the United Kingdom, choose peace, but that we must be ready to defend it. I will end with some of my favourite words from the man who led us through that conflict:

“In all our long history we have never seen a greater day than this. Everyone, man or woman, has done their best.”

8.38 pm

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): It is a pleasure to take part in today's important debate. The end of the second world war in Europe was a defining moment in the history of Wales and Ynys Môn. It brought an end to six years of conflict during which an estimated 300,000 Welshmen served in the military, with 15,000 killed. Ynys Môn may have been many miles from the frontline of the blitz in south-east England, but it was still targeted by bombing raids, including at the strategic port of Holyhead.

The island played a vital part in the war effort. RAF fighter crews flew sorties from the island bases of Mona and Valley against Germany, while an airfield at Bodorgan was used as a storage space. Those airfields were responsible for training and hosting thousands of servicepeople, with 1,378 men of the RAF and 408 officers and women of the WAAF based on RAF Mona by the end of the war. The legacy of the war can still be felt today. Valley remains a centre of military and civil aviation, with Mona now used as a relief landing ground. Valley is a source of highly skilled jobs and education for local people, with a partnership between Grŵp Llandrillo Menai and Babcock delivering apprenticeships to local young people, including aerospace engineering maintenance.

The impact was felt on the home front too. The island hosted evacuee children from Liverpool and Manchester, helping to keep them safe during the air attacks by Germany. There were also more than 40,000 Welsh people who could not speak English, especially in the western parts of Wales, such as Ynys Môn. To address that, the BBC broadcast news of the war for around 20 minutes of every day in Welsh; such programming paved the way for S4C decades later. Rationing still impacted the everyday lives of the people of Ynys Môn for many years after the war ended.

Those who sacrificed so much both on the home front and in the fields of conflict did so in the name of peace and order. The rules-based international order that emerged from the war is now under increasing strain. As we see a rise in the far right across the globe and leaders who disregard human rights and international law, we must be bold in confronting them. We have an obligation to honour the sacrifices of the generation before us by upholding the legacy that they left us. I thank the organisers of the service that I will be attending on Mynydd Parys on VE Day to commemorate the contribution that Wales and Ynys Môn made in the war and in bringing about a more peaceful world. I close my contribution by reaffirming that message and noting how important it is that we honour those who fought and sacrificed so much for our freedom.

8.41 pm

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak in this debate to commemorate the 80th anniversary of VE Day. I am proud to serve as the Member of Parliament for Bexleyheath and Crayford and to represent a constituency that is home to around 2,000 veterans. My constituency is in proximity to the Royal Arsenal in Woolwich, in the south-east corner of London. Back in the day, the Royal Arsenal was home to one of the biggest munitions factories in the UK, with 32,000 employees producing guns, shells, cartridge cases and bombs, so my constituency became a prime target for Nazi bombing.

While many of its residents were fighting overseas, my constituency was really playing its part to support the war effort. Crayford was home to the Vickers factory, which again produced machine guns, anti-aircraft predictors, naval gun-laying equipment, fuses and casings for Barnes Wallis's bouncing bomb. The Slade Green heavy anti-aircraft battery was built in the late 1930s and was the most easterly anti-aircraft site built inside the London inner artillery zone. Today, the gun emplacements, fire command post, pillboxes and air raid shelter are still standing. After a successful local campaign in 2010, the site is now grade II listed.

There are a number of war memorials across the constituency, including the garden of remembrance in Oaklands Road, Bexleyheath; St Augustine's church in Slade Green; St Paul's church in Northumberland Heath; and the Crayford war memorial garden. A window in St Paulinus church, Crayford, commemorates three members of the women's voluntary services who died in a V1 explosion in July 1944. In total, 66 people were killed and 184 properties were destroyed, with 7,000 properties being damaged in the area around Crayford High Street. Hundreds more properties were destroyed across the constituency as a result of Nazi bombing.

I pay tribute to the East Wickham & Welling War Memorial Trust for the work it does to commemorate the war effort and the brave soldiers from Bexleyheath and Crayford who served in the second world war. Its area of benefit covers parts of my constituency and the constituency of the hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French). It has carried out extensive work to ensure that a memorial is in place for local people who gave their lives, and it holds an incredibly moving service every November to remember them.

I also mention the hard work and dedication of the two Royal British Legion branches in my constituency—the Bexleyheath and Welling branch and the Crayford branch—and thank them for all the work that they do to recognise the important contributions to the war effort. I look forward to joining them in attending a number of events in my constituency on Thursday to commemorate VE Day and to be able to pay my respects to those who made the ultimate sacrifice for us.

8.44 pm

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): It is an honour to speak in this debate commemorating VE Day, which is of great significance to many in my constituency, where a significant proportion of the population are veterans or from military families.

The Royal British Legion has encouraged us to ensure that the stories of veterans are at the centre of our commemoration events this week, so I would like to share the story of my grandfather, James Paterson, who was a navigator on a Stirling bomber. On 16 August 1943, his plane was shot down in south-east France. Only two of the crew of seven survived—my grandfather was one of them. He was rescued by the Resistance in the area of Ambérieu and was saved by three families, who hid him at great personal risk—in the town, and in the forest and the hills nearby. Eventually, four months later, he was smuggled out, over the Pyrenees, to safety.

Without the bravery of those families, my mother would never have been born and I would not be here today. I pay a special tribute to Marius and Jeanne Lapierre, who hid my grandfather in their bakery. In 2014, my father's research reconnected my family with the Lapierrés and we have since remained in contact. Last year, I was honoured to visit Monique Lapierre—one of the daughters of the family, after whom my aunt is named—who has since sadly died.

As we remember this week the bravery of all those, like my grandfather, who fought in the armed forces for freedom in Europe, let us also remember the bravery—often unsung—of those, like the Lapierrés, who fought and resisted in so many different ways at great personal risk to themselves and their children, to save the lives of

strangers. Let us all hope that we would do the same. As we challenge the forces of the far right, and as we recognise and remember the resistance 80 years ago of those who made the ultimate sacrifice to defend Europe against Nazism, let the memory of all those who showed such bravery never be forgotten.

8.47 pm

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in such a significant debate as we celebrate the 80th anniversary of the allied victory in Europe and the victory over Japan. Today, we honour all the men and women who gave us the freedom we enjoy today, and who fought against fascism for our freedom, dignity and liberation. Nearly a third of those men and women came from the Indian subcontinent: 2.5 million Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs—the largest volunteer army ever seen in history. One of those men was my grandfather, Nand Singh, who served in what was known as Malaya. Before him, my great-grandfather fought in Europe during the first world war.

Growing up, my parents recounted stories about the sacrifices that my forebears made during both world wars, but I did not see those contributions recognised elsewhere—not in the history textbooks at school, the documentaries on TV or the films on the big screens. Although they have been mentioned today, some 2.5 million men were simply airbrushed out of history. Despite a valiant effort to expose that history, it remains all too easy to surrender to the fear and to forget our historic unity, especially during flashpoints of racial or religious division. This VE Day, we must remain firm in our pursuit for the truth of our past: the forgotten stories of how Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs rallied together to achieve a common goal. Through paying tribute to those stories of unity, we can fight the lies that tell us our perceived differences define and divide us.

The second world war was bloody, brutal and barbaric, but within that violent context, there are glimmers of hope: stories of hope and unity, of togetherness instead of division, and of respect for our rituals over denigration of them; stories to drown out the nasty, noisy narratives that we see online and on our streets, which pit one religion against another, judge us by our skin, and dictate the respect we deserve based on religious identity; and stories to remind us that despite modern-day racial tensions, flashes of sectarian violence and religious hostilities, we can work together, we can stand united and we do have a shared history. I pay tribute to those brave men and women whose resilience and fortitude built this country, and whose shoulders we stand on as we enjoy the freedoms we enjoy today.

8.50 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Victory in Europe Day is a time not only to celebrate, but to reflect and remember. I am privileged to represent a community that does all three.

Recently, I met two veterans of the war, both 100 years young. It was an honour to spend time with them, listening to their stories. In April 1945, Mr Philip Jackson from Keighley drove one of the first wagons into Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, notorious as the location of the death of Anne Frank, her family and over 70,000 inmates in the cruellest and most unspeakable of

[Robbie Moore]

conditions. The work of Mr Jackson and his unit not only began the process of recuperation for the survivors, but provided us with a record of that terrible place for the world to see. I also met Pam Rae from Ilkley. Mrs Rae was a Women's Royal Naval Service radar mechanic, installing cutting-edge radar sets in ships on the Clyde, including HMS Vanguard. In fact, Mrs Rae took part in the original VE Day celebrations and the parade in Glasgow 80 years ago.

Groups working to preserve the memory of that great generation and educate the young are strong in Keighley and Ilkley. Our cadet forces are a constant presence, flying the flag for our modern armed forces, and an organisation called the Men of Worth Project has meticulously researched the lives, stories and legacies of hundreds of men and women of the first and second world wars from Keighley and Ilkley. I thank Andy Wade and his team for their incredible work. Our very own Home Guard unit, WR28, is still going strong. When I visited that unit recently, I was thoroughly impressed by the traditions that it is still keeping alive.

Of course, even once the fighting is over, our armed forces continue to remember those who fought. That memory is also preserved by our fantastic armed forces and veterans breakfast club, which helps bring a vital social network to veterans and servicemen across the Ilkley area. Mark Sugrue and the team recently held a sleep-out to raise money for and awareness of veterans in crisis. Across the whole of the Keighley and Ilkley constituency, we are incredibly proud of our veterans.

To conclude, I wish to make reference to those soldiers for whom victory in Europe 80 years ago was not the end. Victory over Japan would take another three gruelling months, and right up until the atomic bombs were dropped, it was widely feared that a full invasion of Japan was inevitable. I thank those soldiers for their service, their dedication and their commitment to our nation. I wish all Members of this House and my constituents a very happy VE Day, and look forward to celebrating with them on VJ Day in August.

8.53 pm

Adam Jagee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Every anniversary commemorating the allies' victories on VE Day and VJ Day is a significant one. The triumph of liberal democracy over authoritarianism, nationalism and fascism is a lesson from history that we must never forget, and a sacrifice made by so many courageous men and women that must always be remembered.

This year is even more significant, as we mark 80 years since the end of world war two. But for the grace of God, this could therefore be the last significant anniversary that we share with surviving veterans of the greatest generation—heroes one and all. I extend my most profound gratitude to those heroes in Newcastle-under-Lyme, across our United Kingdom and in all parts of the then empire, now the Commonwealth of Nations. They fought so that we could have the privilege of living in the world we live in today, one in which we enjoy freedom and security, democracy and decency, and respect and understanding. Our world will be a darker place when we lose the last of the greatest generation.

Yesterday, back home in our ancient and loyal borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme, I had the great privilege of attending a VE Day party in the Westlands. It was a celebration to rival those held on VE Day itself, full of families—some of which had three generations present—with much merriment, real gratitude, genuine loyalty, obvious patriotism and serious pride. My thanks go to Kay, Yvonne, Suzanna, Dianne and Sarah for their organisational prowess and for bringing so many members of the community together. I would also like to play my small part in paying tribute to and remembering those who we lost during the war and those who have passed since.

Fred Kite was a world war two veteran born in Newcastle-under-Lyme and who fought in north Africa, Normandy and Greece. He was the only second world war British soldier to receive the Military Medal three times. His third was awarded for the

“greatest personal courage and his example of remaining in action against odds that were much against him”.

That is a lesson for us all. I would also like to remember two Staffordshire-born Spitfire pilots; they were both born in my constituency and flew as part of the Photo Reconnaissance Unit.

There are countless stories from not just the United Kingdom, but the Commonwealth and the wider world—stories of normal people doing extraordinary things, all in the name of freedom. The Brampton Museum in our town centre has an exhibition looking at the contribution our community made to victory in Europe some 80 years ago, with some amazing stories about some amazing people. The spirit of togetherness and solidarity from the war forms the stories that my grandparents shared with me as a child, and they will live with me forever.

My grandfather came to this country from Jamaica in 1941 to serve King and country on his British passport. Many men like him came to roll up their sleeves and not just help defeat the Germans, but rebuild Britain too. How lucky are we that they did? Without the blood, sweat and tears of men and women from across the Commonwealth fighting on the beaches, in the air and on the mainland, we could not and would not have won the war. As we celebrate 80 years since the end of the most terrible global war in modern history—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I call Monica Harding.

8.56 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): On this 80th anniversary of VE Day, I pay tribute to those brave men and women from Esher and Walton who played their part; their names are etched on memorials throughout my constituency. All Saints church in Weston Green, Esher, has undertaken the invaluable project of recording the stories of some of the fallen on its memorial, including soldiers who fell in Italy, north Africa and the far east, sailors lost in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, and pilots lost over Norway and Egypt.

We are privileged to have veterans who are still with us. My constituent Wilbur Holver celebrated his 100th birthday last month. Born in America, he served as a marine engineer, clearing mines to assure the safe passage of allied ships outside Le Havre and Antwerp, which became

essential entry points for allied supplies. Wilbur told me he celebrated VE Day in three countries. First, in Holland, he celebrated with the British troops. He said it was “the biggest party I’ve ever been in”.

It was still going when he left and returned five days later—he said that the party lasted a month or more. He then returned to France and partied some more, before ending up in London on leave, where he found himself in front of Buckingham Palace, still partying. He came to live in England, in Esher, and we are lucky to have him.

Our local area suffered during the blitz. It was once described as doodlebug alley on account of the many German V-1s passing overhead. In June 1944, a V-1 fell on Imber Court in Esher, the Met police training ground, killing 20 men of the Welsh Guards training battalion competing that day in their regimental sports competition.

On the home front, Sir Bruce White, who lived in Hersham, was instrumental in the design of the floating Mulberry harbours, and the people of Walton played their part in units such as the Walton Sparrows, which formed a vital anti-aircraft battery. The Women’s Land Army operated at Rivernook Farm in Walton and at Bell Farm, and the Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes moved its headquarters to Claygate in my constituency. More than 150 local women worked there, provisioning millions of men through the canteens and bars scattered across the globe; NAAFI oversaw 7,000 canteens, and its facilities served more than 3.5 million cups of tea every day. When the war finally ended, Oatlands Park Hotel, which is still going, played host to the official celebrations, with cabaret and hundreds of guest.

As we commemorate 80 years since victory in Europe, we owe a profound debt to those who made and make sacrifices—even final sacrifices—to bring about a better, gentler world. We must never lose sight of the profound blessing and fragility of peace and how hard it was won.

8.59 pm

Lillian Jones (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): Last Friday, I visited Kilmarnock football club to witness the signing of the armed forces covenant next to its award-winning memorial garden. It was both a pleasure and an honour to see the club’s continued commitment to our veterans, and its acknowledgement of those who lost their lives in the service of our country. The timing was perfect, as in this most important of weeks we celebrate the 80th anniversary of victory in Europe—VE Day—and we remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice to defeat Hitler’s Nazis. This is also one of our last opportunities to pay tribute to living second world war veterans who served and sacrificed to defend our way of life.

The Scottish contribution to the events leading up to VE Day on 8 May 1945 was truly significant, encompassing military service, industrial output and civilian support. Scotland, although small in size, played a disproportionately large role in Britain’s war effort during world war two. The war generation are true heroes, and the backbone on which this country was built.

I want to tell the House more about the contribution that Kilmarnock football club made to the war effort. Its ground, Rugby Park, was requisitioned by the Government on 4 June 1940, and a few days later the troops marched in and took over the ground to be used

as an oil and fuel depot. In July that year, the club gave an interest-free loan to the British Government of £1,000 for the war effort. It may not sound significant today, but let me put it into context: 80 years ago, it would have taken an average worker five years to earn that amount. During my visit, it was wonderful to see the original documentation from the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Kingsley Wood, which remains a treasured piece of the club’s history.

At this time when every part of our nation united—Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland, pulling together in a time of need—Kilmarnock football club was no exception, and made its own contribution. Many players stepped up and did their duty, in the name of service to our nation. Sadly, eight of them paid the ultimate price and never returned home. I want to remember them, not only in this debate but always. May we never forget their sacrifice. When the war ended the club reclaimed its ground, and its generous loan was repaid in full, albeit interest-free. After the events of wartime, and with the efforts of Italian and German prisoners of war, Rugby Park was rebuilt, with football returning in April 1945. VE Day was as much a moment of pride and relief for Kilmarnock as for any part of the UK, marking the culmination of years of sacrifice and determination.

The lessons of the second world war and the global security challenges we face today reinforce the need to face our adversaries together, through the strength of our alliances such as NATO. Learning the lessons of history is a meaningful way in which we can pay tribute and honour the sacrifices made by so many veterans who fought for our country in world war two and subsequently.

9.2 pm

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): One of the most moving accounts that I read this week was that of 101-year-old Ruth Klauber, a Jewish refugee and a mechanic on the Lancaster bombers. She spoke not of celebration but of sacrifice. When asked for her opinion of yesterday’s celebrations, she said:

“Well, yes, we won the war. It’s good to celebrate that we won the war and what that means for democracy. But for me when I think of VE Day, I think of the pilot with whom I fell in love, the only man I ever loved. And he flew many successful missions but his last was his last. He never came home.

For me I think of the cost of war. War is not something you celebrate. It is something you remember. It is something that you look back on and reflect on how it was a failure of man. It was a failure to reach an outcome that didn’t involve hundreds of thousands of young men being killed.”

She went on:

“We must never stop always working to ensure we don’t end up in a scenario again where more people are slaughtered. And that means you always have to stand up for democracy.”

Those words should weigh heavy on all our shoulders in this significant week.

I also want to take the opportunity to commend the community across my constituency whose efforts have been immense during this significant week. Across our towns, villages and housing estates, the atmosphere is one of pride and remembrance. Lamp posts and walls are proudly decorated with our national flag and with banners and bunting—all of it part of a collective effort to both celebrate and commemorate the great allied

[Carla Lockhart]

victory. There is no greater source of pride than seeing our communities come together, not only to mark this historic triumph but to remember those who secured the civil and religious liberties that we enjoy today. I am free to hold and express my views because of the bravery, the willingness to serve, and the ultimate sacrifice made by those who stood against fascism, tyranny, genocide and racism, aggression and suppression.

I note the exemplary effort of Upper Bann. Portadown was a key industrial centre and played a significant role through its engineering, textile and transport industries. Lurgan played a critical role. Brownlow House, a grand 19th-century building that I have spoken of—I thank the Minister for her visit—was the headquarters for the US army, and General Eisenhower himself visited it. The D-day landings were planned from Brownlow House. Banbridge was not found wanting; it was central to the agricultural supply chain when people participated in the dig for victory. Young men from Banbridge served with distinction in our armed forces.

That is only the tip of the iceberg as to how Northern Ireland contributed to the overall victory. Northern Ireland stepped up, and I want it clearly noted in this House today how thankful we are for the united effort from every corner of our United Kingdom.

9.5 pm

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): The 80th anniversary of VE Day and VJ Day is a time for us to remember and honour those who fought to defend our freedoms, our values and our people. It is also a time to recognise the contribution that veterans from across our country continue to make to their communities.

For many of our veterans, their service to this country and their commitment to fighting for our values do not end when they leave the military. I will take this opportunity to tell the House about one such veteran from my community, Mike Lyons. I did not know Mike for very long, but one of the privileges that we have in this place is that we get to meet people who we instinctively know are the best of us, which is what Mike was. He served in the military for seven years, and was a member of the Royal British Legion's New Addington branch for more than 30 years.

For many years, Mike ran the Final Roll Call campaign to ensure that world war one soldiers who returned from fighting, and who were institutionalised due to what we now know as post-traumatic stress disorder, were properly honoured and given their rightful place in history. His campaign led to 26 servicemen who were buried in unmarked graves, without a military burial, finally being given the dignified memorials they deserved. Mike wanted to ensure that their memories lived on and, just before Christmas, asked me to light a candle for them in Parliament. Our candle of remembrance in Parliament quickly turned into a full-on candle-lighting ceremony at the tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey. At one point, someone questioned whether we needed insurance for the bugler.

Sadly, Mike passed away before our ceremony could take place, but with the support of his family and friends, we held our ceremony as planned. In March, it was a privilege to welcome Mike's family, his friends, his

local councillors, community leaders from the family centre and New Addington Pathfinders, members of the Royal British Legion, Army cadets, members of Croydon's veteran community, the Minister for Veterans and People, flagbearers and a bugler to Westminster Abbey for our candle ceremony. I hope that we did Mike proud.

As we look ahead to the 80th anniversary of VE Day and VJ Day, we must commit ourselves to ensuring that our armed forces community is looked after now and in the future, so I welcome the Government's announcement of a UK-wide support system for our veterans. In Croydon, we have launched the Croydon Cares for Veterans campaign to raise funds for SSAFA Croydon and the New Addington branch of the Royal British Legion. As it was for the second world war generation and for Mike, it is our actions that demonstrate our commitment to the people who serve this country. It is our actions that will protect our values, and it our actions that will honour what our armed forces community continue to fight for today.

9.7 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is great that this House is commemorating the historic victory that marked the end of the war, which had taken so much. At a time when we are often asked to apologise for so much, it is important to recognise the victory that we had in the name of democracy and freedom throughout the world. It is good to see the Minister in his place.

Members will be aware that I had a debate in this Chamber on the heroism of Newtownards man Blair Paddy Mayne, who richly deserves to be awarded a posthumous VC. I was amazed by the number of people who, until they watched the TV drama "SAS: Rogue Heroes", did not quite understand how integral Blair and, indeed, Northern Ireland soldiers were to the war effort. It has to be remembered that we had no conscription in Northern Ireland—we did not need it, because every single man who joined up did so out of love for King, country and the principle of freedom. That is still the case today for serving armed forces personnel from Northern Ireland, who proudly serve King and country and who gave their all during the troubles.

The debate on Blair Mayne highlighted to me that as a youngster, I was taught about the essential contribution of Northern Ireland's men and women to the UK's war effort to secure victory over the Nazis, and over Japan in Asia. My constituents in Strangford gave their lives, with war memorials in the Ards peninsula, Comber, Killyleagh and Ballynahinch. Hundreds of young men, and indeed some women, gave their all for King and country at that time.

We need to remember that Northern Ireland contributed significantly to war production. Weaponry, munitions, aircraft, tanks, ships and small arms were all built in Northern Ireland. There were also opportunities for women. For example, the Royal Ulster Constabulary required female police, although they were subject to a marriage bar. Similarly, women were employed in the auxiliary services for the armed forces and as an additional agricultural labour force. In engineering, some 250 women were employed, and by 1943 some 12,500 women were employed in Northern Ireland.

For these reasons, those from both sides of the community—Roman Catholic and Protestant; nationalist and Unionist—will be celebrating with a full heart, with family stories and memories handed down through the generations. I think some 44,000 served in uniform, and 10% of those did not come back. Separately, 1,000 people lost their lives in the Belfast blitz, which acknowledged the importance of the Northern Ireland war effort. Some time ago, I attended a memorial service to the young RAF and Army men who were killed in the blitz in Newtownards.

The role of Ireland Northern in the victory for the allies cannot be overstated. As the MP for Strangford, I am proud not simply to lay a wreath in their memory each year, but to raise my hand in salute to the members of the armed forces, the labourers and engineers, the women who filled the gaps and those who lost their lives in the blitz. We salute them all again today, and honour their sacrifice. The best way we can honour them is to recreate that British spirit in our children and our grandchildren, and remind them of the cost of all we hold so dear. We will remember them, and on 8 May we will celebrate them in communities throughout this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

9.10 pm

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): In York Outer, we will be celebrating VE Day and the peace we cherish today as a result of the tenacity of the wartime generation.

May I take just a moment to set the scene of what VE Day was like in York? After nearly six long years of war, the city burst into life with spontaneous celebration. For the first time since 1939, York Minster was lit up, with its great bells ringing out across the city. There is even a recording on YouTube of the minster's bells from that day with a comment that the bellringers, like the rest of the nation, may have been a little out of practice. However, on VE Day they rang out with the sound of triumph and relief. It was truly a suburban tapestry of victory in York, with Canadian service personnel seen dancing in Fulford and driving about York on their motorbikes. Bonfires were lit across the city, including throughout the many communities that make up my constituency. One particularly memorable bonfire was in Bishopthorpe, on the very site where the wonderful Bishopthorpe junior school now stands—a symbol, then and now, of hope for the next generation.

I wrote to all the fantastic primary schools in my constituency to task our talented pupils with drawing a York street party celebrating VE Day, and one of those drawings is on its way to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The winning school is Elvington Church of England primary school—it is just a stone's throw from RAF Elvington, where French pilots flew alongside British pilots for the last years of the war—and I will be writing to the lucky pupil to congratulate them soon.

York played a huge role in the second world war, and it continues to do so today. We are home to the Queen Elizabeth barracks at Strensall, to the HQ of the 2nd Medical Group and to many inspirational serving personnel and their families, who serve our country. I am truly privileged to have them in my constituency. We also have the Yorkshire Air Museum in Elvington, which makes a huge contribution to the local area. This week, it will be hosting a "We'll Meet Again" weekend to celebrate VE Day and take residents back to the 1940s.

Finally, I must say that York was truly magical in its contributions to the war effort. It really contributed to the profound victory we had in Europe, and I pay tribute to the families that played their part.

9.13 pm

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): It is a real privilege to be able to contribute to this debate. It is right that we take the time to pause and reflect on the sacrifices that the great generation made. Not only are the generation that fought in the war mostly no longer with us, but even those who remember the war as a child are getting fewer and fewer by the day. My mum often talks about how her earliest memory was the party and my grandparents dressing up, but only later did she realise what it was. The hon. Member for Angus and Perthshire Glens (Dave Doogan) reminded us why that generation often did not talk about what they had experienced and the difficulties they had shared.

Before the new town of Cumbernauld was created, the people of the villages that made up my constituency were miners, weavers and farm workers. They all played a massive part in fuelling and feeding the nation and contributing to what we now refer to as the defence industries. We do not remember these people every year on Remembrance Sunday, but it is important to pay tribute to their work today, because they were as big a part of the war effort as those who fought in the armed services.

My family members were those essential workers. My grandfather, Sam Laidlaw, was an engineer in a paper mill that had been repurposed for essential war work. My other granddad, John Murray, was a dairyman whose farmhands were women from the Land Army and prisoners of war who were brought in daily from a camp up the road. My great-aunt, Helen Murray, was a nurse in Clydebank during the two days of the blitz. None of them ever talked about it.

Representing a new town, it is difficult to look at our war memorial and not think of the town as it is today—the seventh biggest in Scotland—instead of as the village that it once was. The names are so familiar and so similar—a full generation of a village wiped out. It would be the same across the nation.

I am glad we have been able to make time today to pay tribute to all those who played a role, whatever that role was. Whether that was in the armed forces, the mills, the farms or the mines, we thank you.

9.16 pm

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): I am always humbled by the history of this Chamber, but more so than ever today. It was a Government of national unity who steered the United Kingdom through the second world war, and the names of Churchill, Attlee, Eden, Bevin and Sinclair all deserve to echo through history. Conservative, Liberal and Labour MPs united in service to defend our nation, our allies and our values in the struggle against tyranny. As we commemorate VE Day 80 years on, I begin with a tribute to our political leaders of the time, because it was not inevitable that history would take the course that it did. In the early summer of 1940, some voices called for us to make peace with Hitler.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): My hon. Friend talks about commemoration. The Westhoughton branch of the Royal British Legion, set up in 1921 after 109 soldiers from the town died in the first world war, was one of the first of its kind in the country. With that in mind, will he congratulate the Westhoughton branch of the Royal British Legion on the excellent VE commemoration event that was hosted at the weekend?

Andrew Lewin: I will happily congratulate the branch of the Royal British Legion in my hon. Friend's constituency and all those across the country, which are doing such valuable work.

After the fall of France, there were some who said that despite the heroism at Dunkirk, our military was on the back foot. A small number advocating for talks with Germany might even have suggested, to use a modern phrase, that we did not have many cards to play—thank goodness their advice was so emphatically rejected.

The decision to stand against Hitler's Germany in 1940 was not born merely of self-preservation; it was so much more. It was a free and proud country saying that aggressors cannot be rewarded, that a hateful ideology must be opposed and that our allies are worth fighting for. Those are timeless lessons. The greatest debt we all owe is to the brave men and women who served and sacrificed so much during the worst conflict that humanity has ever known.

Hatfield, in my constituency, is rightly famous as the birthplace of the Geoffrey de Havilland Mosquito fighter bomber, one of the RAF's most effective weapons against the Luftwaffe and an example of the ingenuity that was so crucial to the war effort. Known as the "Wooden Wonder", more than 6,500 Mosquitos were delivered to allied forces over the course of the conflict, and it is believed that more than 3,000 were built on site in Hatfield.

The neighbours in Welwyn Garden City had an integral role to play as well. A few miles north and east of Hatfield, Panshanger aerodrome started out in 1940 as a decoy factory, luring the Luftwaffe bombers away from Hatfield aerodrome. After victory in the battle of Britain, and with the threat of bombing raids easing, the aerodrome officially became RAF Panshanger in 1943 and operated as an important flying school.

Welwyn Garden City was also a sanctuary for Jewish people fleeing the evil of Nazi tyranny. Civilians were welcomed from 1933 onwards, and Applecroft hostel was established on the west side of town. Thanks to the records of the Welwyn Garden City interfaith group, we know the story of Sam Otto, a 21-year-old Jewish man, who escaped the Nazis in Leipzig, travelled bravely across Europe and was welcomed into the hostel in 1939. He said on his arrival, "If the hostel wasn't heaven, it must be next door to it."

Today, Welwyn Garden City is home to a thriving Ukrainian population, as our community once again opens its arms to those in greatest need. As we commemorate VE and VJ Day, I feel exceptionally fortunate to stand in the Commons Chamber where our political predecessors had the resolve to stand united against Nazi tyranny. I am equally proud to represent Welwyn Hatfield, to recognise some of the contributions made to the war effort and to simply say thank you to everyone who fought for freedom.

9.20 pm

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): As we reflect on this historic moment, the 80th anniversary of VE Day, we remember the significant contributions of our communities, our country and our Commonwealth. We have heard some very moving and powerful contributions today in this debate from across the Chamber. My own part of the country, Colchester, played a pivotal part in the second world war: our residents served on the frontline and on the home front; our industry stepped up; and our rivers and coastlines were fortified as part of the eastern command line. Many of those fortifications can still be seen in our Castle Park and along the River Colne. They are just a few examples of the many that I could give of the resilience and determination of the people of Colchester during those dark times.

The presence of the armed forces in our community today, and also of veterans of course, is a testament to our enduring commitment to national security and our readiness to respond to crises both at home and abroad. Colchester is marking VE Day and our military history in many ways this week, and over the course of many months. This weekend, I unveiled a new blue plaque at the main gated entrance of the former cavalry barracks, which played such a vital part in the first world war, training and treating England's war horses. The historic guardhouse at that site has been restored and is a reminder of the centuries' long association of the military in Colchester.

On Thursday, at Colchester town hall, we will raise the VE Day flag and the Pegasus flag, which is the flag of the airborne forces who did so much to help us achieve victory. We will also gather at Colchester's war memorial with service personnel from 16 Air Assault Brigade and I will later join the Nepalese community, remembering the Gurkha soldiers who contributed so much and who continue to make so many sacrifices in the fight for peace today.

As we honour the sacrifices made by those who fought for our freedom 80 years ago, let us also acknowledge the ongoing contributions made by our present armed forces. Their commitment to protecting our nation and upholding the values that we hold dear is as vital today as it was during the second world war, and we renew our commitment to them. And, as we heard earlier today, we must also renew our commitment to ending conflicts around the world, from Ukraine to the middle east.

9.23 pm

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): As we mark 80 years since the long-anticipated news that the evil Nazi regime, which had orchestrated the greatest act of mass murder in human history and terrorised Europe, had been defeated by the allies, I want to concentrate on the role of my constituency of High Peak in the second world war. So many of our men and women served their country during the war, but, sadly, far too many made the ultimate sacrifice in defeating fascism. Although our communities were spared much of the horrendous bombing that affected larger areas such as London, there were some notable exceptions.

It was one July evening in 1942 when the Luftwaffe found themselves flying over High Peak. After failing to find the large propeller factory in Lostock, because of low cloud cover, the high-speed bombers wreaked havoc

on two High Peak villages, one dropping its bombs on Torr Vale and the other dropping two bombs near Swizzels Sweet Factory. Had those bombs landed on the factory, the world may never have known Love Hearts, and many childhoods would have been poorer for it. The good news is that Swizzels is surviving and thriving today.

Skipping ahead to 1943, more planes were flying over High Peak, but this time it was the 617 Squadron of the RAF practising the low-level flying needed for Operation Chastise—the squadron more commonly known as the Dambusters. The Dambusters were vital in convincing people that the allies were winning the war against Nazism, and it was the rolling hills of the High Peak that helped the brave RAF personnel to pull it off.

In this time of celebration and reflection, we naturally remember the strength and bravery of the people who fought during the second world war to keep our country free, and we must never lose sight of the scale of the sacrifice that people make when they join our armed forces today.

My uncle Ronald Pearce served in the second world war and fought bravely in the Italian campaign. He survived, but the war took its toll on him. It was a time when there was little understood and little done for those suffering from trauma and mental health issues. That is why I warmly welcome this Government's announcement of VALOUR—a UK-wide veterans' support service that will work with health, employment and housing charities and which is backed by one of the largest ever Government funding commitments for veterans.

As we celebrate the incredible achievements of the greatest generation, we cannot hide from the fact that we live today in an increasingly unstable world, with antisemitism once again on the rise and a war on European soil because of a tyrant's invasion of a neighbouring country. May our generation have all the fortitude and resilience of the generation we celebrate today.

9.26 pm

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): Victory in Europe Day in 1945 was a moment of national rejoicing. It was also the moment when Britain and the world started to count the cost of war—the human catastrophe of totalitarianism. Yet it would be hard to find anyone in the country who would say that the price was too high. I think we heard that today in the moving recitations from the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) and the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart).

That greatest generation fought for our country and for freedom, but they also fought for British values of democracy and the rule of law. It is estimated that in 1941 there were only 11 functioning democracies in the world, and half of those could trace their genesis back to this mother of Parliaments. It is no exaggeration to say that democracy is Britain's greatest gift to the world, and it is our duty to defend that gift, both at home and abroad. It is why I was pleased to see soldiers from Ukraine marching in the VE Day parade this weekend.

Our war leaders in 1945 knew that winning the war was only the first step to winning peace. They started immediately to set up a series of international organisations, including the United Nations, the European Council,

NATO and the European Coal and Steel Community. Together they have protected democracy, freedom and human rights for the past 80 years. The spread of democracy across the globe has been a great success, but we must not be complacent.

Threats to our democracy are real and not all come from hostile nations. Some arise from conditions in our own country. Our society faces great challenges, with yawning inequality that is greater than at any time since the 1930s, when similar circumstances saw fascism sweep across Europe. This is not a time for hands-off government; it is a time for intervention. Just as in the aftermath of the second world war when the Attlee Government promised good jobs, high-quality homes, universal healthcare and educational opportunity for all, so the mission for this Government is to deliver that commitment anew to the British people.

On this 80th anniversary of VE Day, we have so much to be proud of and thankful for as a nation. I am in complete concordance with the hon. Member for Angus and Perthshire Glens (Dave Doogan) in that we need to take heed to protect, preserve and defend the precious gift of democracy, which was won at such great cost and selflessly bequeathed to us by the wartime generation.

I thought I would leave my final words to Churchill himself, who in his address to Parliament on 8 May 1945 added a coda that was not included in his original broadcast—he actually said these words initially to the media, so I hope he got permission from the Speaker at the time before coming to the House. Churchill said that the strength of the parliamentary institution has been shown to enable it to at the same time wage war and

“preserve all the title deeds of democracy”.—[*Official Report*, 8 May 1945; Vol. 410, c. 1869.]

9.29 pm

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): This week, events are being held across the Bishop Auckland constituency celebrating 80 years of peace in Europe, which followed a war so terrible that we still mark the years since. I vividly remember celebrating the 50th VE Day 30 years ago in my last year at primary school by dressing up as an evacuee, singing Vera Lynn songs and colouring in a Union Jack to be hung as bunting. Back then, some of that resilient war generation were still sprightly enough to kick a football, or at least to sit and share their memories with us. But age has wearied them with each passing year, and fewer and fewer are still with us, so weeks like this are important, lest we ever forget that generation who stood firm against tyranny and crossed land, sea and sky to secure the freedoms we enjoy today.

Bishop Auckland played its role by sending young men off to war, caring for evacuees and digging for victory. Victory in Europe cost the best blood of the 20th century, and those who survived not only won the war, but went on to win the peace and build modern Britain, including the welfare state and the national health service. We owe that generation a debt we will never be able to repay.

My grandad was just 19 when, with the 12th Yorkshire Battalion, he parachuted into Ranville in the early hours of D-day, and later into Arnhem during Operation

[Sam Rushworth]

Market Garden. He never really spoke of what he saw until the final months of his life, but he carried it with him quietly. My dad recalls a time when they sat to watch the film “The Longest Day”. In a scene when one of the officers shouts, “Come on, men,” Granddad walked across the room, turned off the telly and said, “They weren’t men; they were boys.” But home from war he came. He raised two sons—for many years as a single father—and did his part to build a better world. He would have been amazed to have a grandson serving in this place.

The victory won in Europe 80 years ago this week was not a victory for Britain and France over Germany, but of liberal democracy over fascism and racism. It was a victory for the whole of Europe. Europe is the best example of lasting peace and reconciliation that the world has ever seen. May we always see ourselves as friends and allies and never surrender to those who want to divide us.

Across the world in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan and beyond, we see conflict once again robbing children of their homes, and families of their future. Here in Europe, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has shattered assumptions that peace in our continent was secure. It is not; it must be defended. Peace must be defended not only with arms but with unity across Europe, with moral clarity and with political courage to stand up for international law and human rights.

Remembrance is not nostalgia; it is responsibility. If we are to honour a generation that fought for us, we must fight in our time for the peace that they gave us.

9.32 pm

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): As I was born in 1958, my childhood was surrounded by people who had fought in world war two, but as a child it all seemed so long ago. My father was an RAF doctor serving in the middle east and in East Anglia. The fatality rate of the air crews was quite appalling, not least because of all those killed as the planes crashed. I remember stories my dad told us of crawling into stricken planes to extract wounded pilots. Like many who fought in the war, he spoke about it only in his greatest old age, but now that I have grandchildren of my own, it no longer seems so long ago. What tricks time and memory play on all of us.

Suffolk was on the frontline defending our country. Our airfields were key to the liberation of Europe. The brave men of the United States air force flew bombing raids from Rougham deep into Europe, and the incredible fighter ace and double amputee Wing Commander Douglas Bader flew from RAF Honington. Vanishingly few of that generation are among us now, but I was delighted to send my congratulations to one of them—Jim Grant, from Stowmarket—on his 100th birthday last year. Jim signed up to the Royal Marines in 1943 and served until 1946. He was present at D-day, firing for the troops at Sword, Juno and Gold beaches. I salute his service.

We must also never forget the thousands of extraordinary ordinary citizens who made this contribution to the people’s war for freedom. In Suffolk, we received thousands of volunteers for the women’s land army from all over

the country to milk cows, pull potatoes and drive tractors. They were determined and indomitable, and alongside the home guard and the ARP wardens they made a huge contribution to our victory.

Many in the House will find it quite unbelievable that war has returned to Europe. As we speak, rockets and drones are being flung at cities, and civilians hide in air raid shelters. Those who start wars do not respect the lessons of history, which, as the great songwriter said, are simply blowing in the wind. They must not be allowed to win. I therefore welcome the Government’s choice to increase defence spending and applaud the commitment to go further—2.5% is really not enough.

Eighty years ago, Mr Churchill addressed the Commons from the other place, this Chamber having been hollowed out by a direct bomb strike. On the same day, he reminded us that Britons were the first

“to draw the sword against tyranny.”

We cannot forget that. It has now fallen to us to safeguard the peace that his generation won, and we must put aside our political differences.

9.35 pm

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): Eighty years ago, celebrations broke out across the country that were spontaneous, joyful and often very noisy. There was a group of people, however, who were not talking loudly about the work they had done during the war. Some were based in Leighton Buzzard, in a place called Q Central. It was a secret communications hub and at its height, more than 2,000 people—predominantly women—were working there, running the largest telephone exchange in the entire world.

Many in the constituency and further afield think that more people need to find out about this contribution. Lots of people know about the neighbouring secret work at Bletchley, but Leighton Buzzard’s contribution has not been recognised for too long. I am proud of the work of a local historian called Paul Brown, who has been bringing that secret work to the public’s attention.

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her remarkable speech, remembering those who contributed to our war effort. Will she join me in remembering all those who fought and fell in world war two from across my Penistone and Stocksbridge constituency, in particular those who worked at Samuel Fox’s steelworks in Stocksbridge to make munitions and equipment to enable a successful outcome to the war?

Alex Mayer: I absolutely think that everyone’s contributions to the war effort were vital to ensure victory and peace.

This Thursday, I will be at Leighton Buzzard war memorial with local people, laying a wreath in memory of those who served at Q Central. It is vital that we make sure that the people whose wartime service was carried out in the shadows are now brought into the light.

9.37 pm

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): As I reflect on VE day and the celebration of victory over fascism in Europe, it strikes me that the war effort was one of common endeavour by ordinary people such as

my grandad, who was a translator at Bletchley Park, and Richard Brock, who, when I met him last year, was 100 years young. Richard was one of the men who liberated Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

To sit with someone who had known that horror at first hand truly was a privilege, and it was a privilege to pass on my personal thanks on behalf of a survivor's family. That is because my friend Krysh had a Polish grandma, and she survived Belsen. After her liberation, she came to Britain and settled here. The rest, as they say, is history. Except it is not just history, is it? It is not something that we can bring out to look at on special occasions and congratulate ourselves on beating fascism before putting it away until the next anniversary. It did not start with the camps, did it? It never does. No, it was more insidious than that.

It was a slow and constant poisoning of minds by people intent only on power. It was a setting up of different groups as scapegoats. It was the use of pseudoscience to back up an ideology of racism and eugenics. It was the use of propaganda to turn people into caricatures and the use of the press to create a narrative of blame. It was the turning of ordinary people on their neighbours. It was taking the propensity of humans to group together and turning that into a sinister tribalism. Why look to the difficult solutions to complex problems when people can simply blame the groups, over there, that they have been taught over many years to hate and fear? In the '20s and '30s, it was the Jews, the Gypsies, the gays and the disabled. It was the intellectuals and the trade unionists. It was anyone who challenged that narrative of hate.

So who is it today? Fascism did not start with the camps, and the ideas underpinning fascism are not artefacts of history. I end with the plea that we do not treat fascism and tyranny as an historical artefact, and that we remember that they are a living possibility—even now, even here. The overthrow of fascism is not a bauble to admire once a year. Rather, it is a reminder that we should never let it get that far ever again, that we must be on our guard and that we should never let it flourish.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. With a two-minute time limit, I call Luke Myers.

9.40 pm

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Today we remember the extraordinary courage, sacrifice and service that brought about victory in Europe 80 years ago, and it has been a privilege to join VE Day commemorations right across my constituency this week. I am proud of our community for organising so many events to honour that brave generation. In our towns and villages, we remember all those who answered that call of service, many of whom would never return. We think of servicemen including Stan Hollis, a local lad from Middlesbrough who earned the only Victoria Cross awarded on D-Day for his sheer bravery in Normandy. We remember servicemen such as Harry Tout, a future mayor of Guisborough, who fought in north Africa and up the spine of Italy. And we remember the airmen, the mariners, the Green Howards and all the others who laid down their lives for freedom.

We also pay tribute to those who played their part on the home front, from the land girls in our North Yorkshire countryside to the women and men of steel, the shipbuilders and steelworkers who kept the country afloat. This made Teesside a target and it was one of the first places in Britain to suffer casualties in the blitz, but the industrial haze also clouded enemy targeting, with the smog protecting the Smoggies. That generation's courage made peace possible. Their service shaped the world we inherited and their patriotism was unwavering. We honour them today not only in words but in the way that, as a society, we stand together for each other and stand up to fear and hatred wherever it rears its head. As we remember them, we rededicate ourselves to the values they fought for: democracy, peace and fairness.

9.42 pm

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): On Thursday 6 March this year, I attended a poignant evening of commemoration in the Bathgate Regal theatre. I believe it was the first 80th anniversary of VE Day event in the UK, and it was a fitting tribute to our local heroes. It was an emotional evening right from the get-go, when the Whitburn Band kicked off with Glenn Miller, because my papa, John Sullivan, was a pianist in a big band. He was also a plumber from a small village north of Glasgow, who was plucked from that village and sent to serve with the RAF in Burma, thousands of miles from his home. He had probably never left the UK before—he might not even have left Scotland before—and he did not know when or if he would return home. But he did return home, and I am here today.

My mind also turned to my other grandfather, Jimmy Campbell, who served as a miner all his days, again making an essential contribution to the war in a dangerous role like so many others in those days. For example, the Linlithgow Munitionettes, the women who worked in the Nobel munitions factory, were exposed to hazardous toxins day in, day out. On 5 February 1943, four of those women went to work and never returned home due to an explosion. Thanks to the work of a local historian, Kathryn Welch, a light has been shown on the Linlithgow women once again, and efforts are under way to remember their service. These examples speak to the service of a generation—ordinary people who did extraordinary things in the name of service and democracy. We owe them a debt of gratitude that we cannot repay, but we must honour their legacy by standing united and resolute in the defence of democracy today.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): With the co-operation of colleagues, we got everybody in. We now come to the Front-Bench speakers, starting with the shadow Secretary of State.

9.44 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure and privilege to wind up such an excellent debate. I pay tribute to all the contributions we have heard as we in Parliament follow the public yesterday in taking our turn to mark the 80th anniversary of VE Day—one of the most momentous days in our country's history. VE Day was the triumph of freedom over tyranny in Europe. We must be forever grateful to all those who served to deliver that victory, not least as the great poignancy of this year's anniversary has come from the

[James Cartlidge]

fading of our living link to those who were there at the time. But that link still remains; there was a particularly powerful moment yesterday at the start of VE Day proceedings in Parliament Square when world war two RAF veteran Alan Kennett, turning 101 later this month, formally gave the military procession its send-off, holding the torch of peace. That living link, often through family, really matters.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) cannot be here today, but I know how much his lifelong passion for the armed forces stems from his father's service with the Royal Navy on D-day. Throughout most of my life, I had a reminder of the war every single day because my late mother was called Faith precisely because she was born in 1941 when our eventual victory was far from certain. Although my mother regarded herself as English, she was born in Haverfordwest in Wales because her dad, my late grandfather, was a civil engineer who in wartime switched from building railways to running a naval munitions factory at Trecwn in Wales; maybe defence procurement is in my blood—who knows?

As many have stressed, it is important to remember that the war did not finish on VE Day and that 80 years ago some of the most bitter fighting would still come in the Pacific theatre. I therefore join my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) in looking forward to celebrating VJ Day in August.

There were many fine speeches. A particular theme was the contribution of so many nations fighting alongside us under our command. The hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) stressed the role of every part of the Union, particularly strong from Northern Ireland. The hon. Members for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) and for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) stressed the role of the Commonwealth, and the hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) specifically mentioned the role of the Indian armed forces, which is ironic given what is happening as we speak in terms of India and Pakistan. Of course, those forces fought so bravely in world war two, at Monte Cassino in particular.

The hon. Members for Coatbridge and Bellshill (Frank McNally) and for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward) stressed the presence of Polish forces in their constituencies, including those involved at Market Garden, in that epic battle. The hon. Member for Aldershot (Alex Baker) stressed the involvement of Canadian troops. My hon. Friend the Member for Bridlington and The Wolds (Charlie Dewhirst) mentioned the Free French hosted in his constituency, and the hon. Member for Colchester (Pam Cox) reminded us of the historical contribution of the Nepalese community, which continues to this day with the incredible contribution of the Gurkha regiment.

It was a particular privilege to hear from those colleagues who served in the armed forces. The hon. and gallant Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) spoke about the importance of his experience visiting a Ukrainian defence company. I also had that experience recently; it was a real lesson and incredibly inspiring. My hon. Friend the Member for Exmouth and Exeter East (David Reed) spoke movingly of his grandfather, whose incredible contribution included D-day, Operation Varsity and of course the traumatic experience of liberating concentration

camps. I hope that inspired him to his own distinguished career in the marines. My hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty), in an excellent speech, stressed the crucial role of RAF Molesworth and RAF Wyton.

We had all the pomp and ceremony on the Mall, but the real story of VE Day celebrations is in communities up and down the country. A number of colleagues spoke about community celebrations, including the hon. Members for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett), for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes), for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) and for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis). The hon. Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) made a fascinating speech, reminding us of the important role of RAF Hawkinge in intercepting the flying bombs, as they were called then. It is ironic because of course we now talk about the menace of drones flying over Ukraine.

A number of colleagues spoke about the important role of women, especially in wartime industry, including the hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) and the hon. Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy, who spoke of the role of her grandmother in the defence industry. A number of colleagues also spoke of the contribution of women working on our farms to ensure that we had food security during the war, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell); my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley), in a fantastic speech; and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who reminded us in particular of the contribution of the Women's Land Army.

The hon. Member for Angus and Perthshire Glens (Dave Doogan) reminded us of what he called the long tail of war—its lasting psychological impact. The hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi) stressed the important role of RAF Valley, which was one of the most enjoyable visits of my time as a Defence Minister.

The Chair of the Defence Committee, the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), made an excellent intervention when he said that surely the most important lesson of world war two is to always stand up to aggressors. That is why it has been so important to support Ukraine as it faces another European war inflicted without a shred of justification by another aggressive, bullying dictator. I am incredibly proud of what we did in government to support Ukraine, and like the hon. Member for Stockton North (Chris McDonald), I was moved to see the Ukrainian soldiers joining our VE Day procession yesterday. I hope that one day, we will get to attend their VE Day celebration.

It is wonderful that our nation has once again had the chance to pay a glorious tribute to that incredible generation who secured victory over tyranny 80 years ago. We must never forget the lessons from that terrible war: to always stand up for democracy and freedom, and to do so by backing our armed forces and standing strong with our allies against the bullying dictators who threaten us once again.

9.50 pm

The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns): It is a great personal privilege to close this debate. I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and

Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock), for her inspiring opening speech and every Member who has contributed so thoroughly to a memorable and important debate.

After the guns fell silent in Europe, during those historic days in May 1945, a period of enduring peace began between the major global powers. That peace was secured by a courageous and undaunted generation of British men and women, and has lasted almost 80 years. Those men and women who served on the frontline, in the factories, down the mines, on the farms or embedded with our allies demonstrated the very best of Britain's character. Their grit and fierce resolve carried Britain through the bleakest of times to victory. The commemorations we have seen this week are a fitting way to pay tribute to their generation and to thank them for what they did for our country—indeed, for the whole world.

As Minister for Veterans and People, I particularly want to express my profound gratitude to all the serving personnel and veterans who are taking part this week from Britain and across the Commonwealth, and of course our Ukrainian allies who took part in the parade yesterday. Whether they are joining the many events here in London and across the nation in person or watching and listening from home, the nation is eternally grateful for their service and the unflagging sacrifice of not just them but their families, who serve as well.

I have witnessed the cost of conflict at first hand. I stand before this House as not only a Minister but a military veteran. During multiple tours in all corners of the world, I have seen the very best of humanity, in the form of remarkable courage and comradeship under pressure. I have also seen its darkest aspects. Never were those two extremes more apparent than during the second world war.

This week, we commemorate 80 years since the liberation of Europe and the west from a period of dark and violent tyranny. We remember all who suffered and fought against the unimaginable horrors of war. We also remember the remarkable British and allied soldiers who liberated Europe, who witnessed the catastrophic consequences of unchecked authoritarianism that attempted to redraw international boundaries through the use of force—a wise person once said, “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it sure does rhyme”—and who rose to the immense challenge of bringing hope to a place where hopelessness had taken root. Remembering these stories and events is an honour and an obligation. They remind us of the importance of standing up to dictators and aggressors. As with many things, Churchill said it best. It was

“a victory of the great British nation as a whole...to draw the sword against tyranny.”

No duty is more vital to the Government than protecting the security of the British people. Even after eight decades without a major world conflict, the illegal invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing war for its right to self-determination have reminded us that we have no inalienable right to peace. To win a lasting peace, we must deter the use of force through deft diplomacy and strength. That is why this Government are working flat out to build a stronger, more robust armed forces, which value and reward service personnel for their courage, their outsized contribution to society and their unwavering commitment

to defending our nation. It is why we are making the biggest increases in defence spending since 2010, and it is why we are modernising defence through a comprehensive strategic defence review, defence reform and defence industrial strategy.

I would like to respond to some of the points raised during the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) highlighted the important point that wars are not won by armies, navies or air forces; they are won by economies, industries and societies. That is never more telling than in Ukraine, where we see a scale of conflict that is incomprehensible in some cases. In world war two the UK had just under 400,000 killed in action. In Ukraine, the Russians have already taken 950,000 casualties. That means that by the end of this debate, the Russians will have taken over 2,000 to 3,000 casualties—in one single day. There are thousands of drone strikes a day, 16,000 artillery rounds used a day, and thousands of tanks destroyed. Woe betide any democracy or individual that takes our peace and democratic system for granted.

I thank the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett), who paid tribute to the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit. I believe that the national monument is proceeding through the planning procedures as we speak. We are also almost there with the monument to Dame Vera Lynn, and Members have my full support with that as we move forward.

As this debate draws to a close, I again thank all Members for their contributions. It is a simple fact that it is society that wins wars. We have heard amazing stories from across all our constituencies about those integral parts, whether that is industry, farmers, or the miners who contributed to the war effort. That is truly remarkable, and it is right to recognise them. It is also right that we paused from the regular cadence of our political work to recognise the immense scale of sacrifice that led Europe to freedom, out of the darkness of violence and tyranny. That generation of our countrymen and women gave their lives so that we might live freely. They leave us and the next generation a reminder that freedom is not free, that we must be resilient during difficult times, and that we must always remember, because

“the nation that forgets its defenders will itself be forgotten”.

In my search for inspiration on how best to close this debate, I stumbled across a quote that perhaps captures the essence of the British spirit to fight and defend. It is by an unknown American soldier, and it goes along these lines: “Those Brits are a strange old race. They show affection by abusing each other, and will think nothing of casually stopping in the middle of a firefight for a ‘brewup’”—to make a drink—“but I would rather have one British squaddie on side than an entire battalion of Spetsnaz! Why? Because the British are the only people in this world who when the chips are down and it seems like there is no hope left, instead of getting sentimental will strap on their pack, charge their rifle, and calmly and wryly grin, ‘Well, let’s get after it.’”

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe and Victory over Japan.

PETITION

Petrol prices in Dunfermline

9.57 pm

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I rise to present a petition regarding high fuel prices for people and businesses in Dunfermline. Prices in Dunfermline, Scotland's historical capital city, are often as much as 6p per litre higher than in towns as close as 10 miles away. This cartel of pricing in and around Dunfermline is damaging small businesses, and unnecessarily increasing the cost to people getting to work, families on the school run or the child taxi service, as well as young people getting to college or training places. It is also increasing carbon emissions as a result of drivers travelling outside the city for cheaper fuel. The petition is signed by my constituents and backed by more than 600 people who have signed an online petition relating to the same issue.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Dunfermline and Dollar,

Declares that residents in Dunfermline are being unfairly charged higher fuel prices compared to nearby areas; states that fuel is an essential commodity required by the majority of people within Dunfermline for their daily lives and essential for the local and regional economy; understands unfair petrol pricing puts a significant strain on family incomes particularly younger people, those on low incomes and small businesses; and notes that over 600 people have signed an online petition relating to this issue.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to instruct the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) to investigate higher petrol prices in Dunfermline compared to the immediate area and take immediate action to address this that will ensure petrol prices are fair and competitive in Scotland's historic capital and newest city.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003066]

Neon Signage

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

10 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): With your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a few comments and observations on the debate we have just had. It was a profound debate, in which colleagues spoke about their personal experiences and their family members. It is fitting that we had it as a way of recognising the sacrifices that millions and millions of people in our armed forces made. I think of the expression:

“They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:

Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.

At the going down of the sun and in the morning

We will remember them.”

The celebrations and the debate today are a way of remembering them.

I will talk about a couple of things, one of which the Minister in the previous debate spoke about—standing up for what is right. My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) talked about the fact that things do not happen in isolation. She talked about how in the second world war there was a demonisation and othering of communities, which led to the catastrophe that occurred. She also said that those things are still happening. I will mention that I am a very proud British and Pakistani Muslim—I was born in Pakistan. At this moment, Pakistanis and Muslims are being demonised by many people—not just the mainstream media, but senior politicians who should know better than to cause division.

I remind the House of the contribution of the Commonwealth to the fighting in the second world war, which was alluded to earlier. My uncle had a King's commission in the British Army at the time, and other members of my family fought for the British Army. In addition, 5.5 million Muslims across the world took part in the war, and many of them died. There were 2.5 million people in the Indian army, and 1 million of them were Muslims; many of them would have been in what is now called Pakistan. It is important that those things are remembered when we look at history and the contributions made by many people.

I will be honest: at this moment in time, with the discourse that is happening in our country and the demonisation of people on boats, migrants and others, I am actually scared. I see the rise of fascism happening, which is exactly what happened in the second world war. I know that the majority of people in this country are brilliant, wise and sensible and will not let those things happen, but it is timely that we have a discussion such as today's debate so that we can remind everybody of the pitfalls that exist.

Like you, Madam Deputy Speaker, I have been on the armed forces parliamentary scheme; I have been with the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force. I have met some of our current Army and Air Force personnel, and I pay a big tribute to them for the wonderful work that they do to protect our country. I respect, cherish and admire them, and we should do as much as we can

to help our armed services and veterans. That is the least we can do for the sacrifices that they have made for our country.

I return to the Adjournment debate. I know that its topic might have caused people some confusion—what on earth does the protection of neon signage as a creative industry mean? Today is an opportunity for me to speak on an issue that may seem niche at first glance, but that speaks to a broader truth about the way that we value heritage, craftsmanship and the lifeblood of our creative economy.

I rise to speak in support of the campaign to protect the heritage craft of neon sign making—a uniquely British tradition that is now at risk. Neon was discovered here in the United Kingdom in 1898. After its discovery, Sir William Ramsay and Morris Travers demonstrated that by passing electricity through the gas, they could make it glow, paving the way for iconic neon signs the world over, from Piccadilly Circus to Times Square.

My constituency of Bolton South and Walkden is proud to be home to Neon Creations, a small but dedicated business led by Catherine and Tony Spink. Since 2005, they have been handcrafting authentic neon signs using techniques that date back over a century. They do not mass produce or cut corners—they are artisans in the truest sense of the word.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): I support everything that my hon. Friend says. I commissioned a piece of neon artwork from a local artist, Stuart Langley, in Teesside a number of years ago. Does she agree that neon is as valid a medium of expression as any other artistic endeavour?

Yasmin Qureshi: Absolutely, and I will go on to talk about the amount of work and experience that artists need to work with neon.

I recently visited Tony and Catherine at their studio and I was transported to a magical world of amazing colours. I saw the stunning artwork that they have produced and was given a demonstration of how they bend the glass to create their signs, which I managed to do as well. To watch them was truly fascinating, but this proud craft is under threat, not because we no longer appreciate its beauty, but because it is being quietly and insidiously eroded by misleading marketing and unfair competition from mass-produced light-emitting diode imitation products, often deliberately and incorrectly labelled as neon signs. Let me be clear: if it is not made of glass and filled with gas, it is not a neon sign.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Lady is putting forward an argument for the creative industries, but what the neon sign market has created cannot be ignored. I always do my studies before I come to the Chamber to take part in the Adjournment debate. MarketWatch predicts that the neon sign market will grow by 7.5% annually between 2024 and 2031, making some \$3.3 billion by 2031. Is there not a way for the neon sign market and the creative sector to work together to the advantage of all?

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I will touch on a few more things.

Authentic neon signs are handcrafted from glass tubes that are heated, bent and shaped by hand, then filled with inert gases, like neon or argon. It is a meticulous

and time-consuming process requiring years of training, dexterity and experience. There are only 27 full-time neon glass benders left in the United Kingdom, down from hundreds in previous decades. It is a red-listed, endangered craft and, without action, it will be lost.

The problem we face is not just commercial, but cultural: it is about the loss of a craft that is as British as Harris tweed or Sheffield cutlery. In fact, like Harris tweed, we believe that neon signs deserve formal legal protection through a certification mark, a defined British standard or, ideally, the introduction of a neon signs protection Act. This is not an anti-technology argument. LED signage has its place—it is cheaper, mass-produced and useful in many applications—but to allow businesses to market LED signs as “neon” is misleading consumers, harming artisans and erasing our heritage.

Let me illustrate how this is affecting real businesses. Neon Creations has seen a sharp drop in demand because customers are being told by large retailers that £30 LED signs are neon signs. The products may look superficially similar, but they are entirely different in construction, quality and artistry. When customers receive them and discover that they are not authentic, they contact businesses like Neon Creations not to buy but to ask for repairs on something that is not actually neon. Catherine and Tony have faced online harassment and threats of legal action, and have had their comments blocked on social media for merely correcting the record. That is what comes to people when they tell truth to power.

Let us consider the facts. Neon is safe. Despite common misconceptions, neon signs are powered by low amperage and do not get dangerously hot. The gases used—neon and argon—are inert and naturally occurring in our atmosphere. Neon is efficient. A typical neon sign for business use costs around 21p per day to run, barely more than an LED and far less than people assume. Neon is sustainable—unlike plastic-heavy LED products, neon signs are made of glass and are fully recyclable. Perhaps most importantly, neon signs last much longer. They have a lifespan of at least 10 years, outpacing LED alternatives, so why are we allowing this confusion to persist? Why are we allowing misleading labels?

The British Sign and Graphics Association, the Heritage Crafts Association, the Federation of Small Businesses and the Greater Manchester chamber of commerce all support stronger protections for neon craftsmanship. This is not just about one constituency or one business; it is about defending the principle that authenticity matters, and that heritage crafts should be recognised, not undermined by the march of mass production. We must also address the issue of consumer transparency. It should not be acceptable for retailers, large or small, to market a product as neon when it contains no glass, no gas and no craftsmanship. We have rightly challenged fake olive oils and falsely labelled meat; we must apply the same standard in this case.

Harris tweed is protected by law, ensuring that only fabric hand-woven in the Outer Hebrides can bear that name. We propose a similar model for neon signs, which could take the form of a certification mark that can only be applied to genuine glass neon products; a formal British standard for neon signs, developed with input from the British Standards Institution and the BSGA; and maybe a private Member's Bill, a neon signs protection Act, that would enshrine a legal definition of the term

[Yasmin Qureshi]

“neon”. These measures would not be burdensome, and they would not create red tape. They would simply be a way of telling the truth in advertising and providing a very important protection to a very small but significant industry.

Let us not forget the cultural value of neon. It is signage, but it is also art; it evokes memories of cinemas, diners, music venues and city skylines. It is a symbol of expression and identity, and to lose it would be to dim the vibrant glow of Britain’s creative past. Neon Creations and other similar businesses are trying to pass on their skills to the next generation, but they cannot, because there is not enough work to justify training new glass benders. As of now, there are no full-time neon trainees in the whole of the United Kingdom. If we do not act, the pipeline of skills will close forever. That is why I am in the Chamber today to advocate for that pipeline and the small businesses that refuse to give up on this craft.

I have written to the Secretary of State, urging the Government to support clear definitions and protections for neon signs. I know that the all-party parliamentary group for craft is supportive of that campaign and is looking into the next steps, but more needs to be done. Will we stand by and watch the lights go out on one of Britain’s most unique and visually iconic crafts, or will we act to ensure that when someone buys a neon sign in this country, they are buying the real thing? This campaign is not just about glowing tubes of gas; it is about truth, heritage and the people behind the glass—people such as Tony and Catherine Spink in Bolton. They are people whose livelihoods depend on honesty in our markets and fairness in our laws. Let us give them that protection. Let us light the way for the future of British neon, and let us ensure that the word “neon” once again stands for authenticity, artistry and excellence.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): That was an absolutely fascinating speech. I look forward to the response from the Minister.

10.13 pm

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): I am sure that you look forward to every response from a Government Minister, Madam Deputy Speaker. I note that my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) ended her speech by saying,

“Let us light the way for the future of British neon”.

I am grateful to her for securing this important debate and, consistent with her approach, I am also grateful for her thoughtful and rather illuminating speech—if you will forgive the pun, Madam Deputy Speaker. I did not actually write that pun; somebody in my Department, to whom I am enormously grateful, wrote it.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Sack them.

Chris Bryant: No, I am not sacking them. You cannot call for civil servants to be sacked from the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, otherwise people will call for you to be sacked.

As the Jamaican reggae artists Tenor Saw and Bob Marley have lyricised,

“Life is one big road with lots of signs”.

This debate has shone a light on not just neon signage itself, but the wider question of how we protect, support and promote the often overlooked corners of our creative economy. Let us be absolutely clear: as my hon. Friend said, neon is not simply about advertising, and it is not just a relic of a bygone era. It is artistry and craftsmanship; it is a part of our living heritage and of the living texture of our urban and rural landscapes. I remember for a while there was a neon sign on entering the Rhondda that used to say, “Two can dine for £1.99. Fine dining.” [Laughter.] I think it is slightly out of date.

From Glasgow to Blackpool and from the corner pub to the west end theatre marquee, there is neon. Behind each flicker of neon gas is a maker, a designer, a glass-bender and an engineer of light. These are not just tradespeople, but creative professionals sustaining a skillset passed down through generations. Many artists in the UK and across the world have taken advantage of what is, as my hon. Friend said, Great British invention. It was only in about 1912 that it passed to the United States of America and became part of its advertising hoardings. We think about neon adverts, but it is an essential art form, too. We have only to think of many of Tracey Emin’s neon works, such as “Fantastic to Feel Beautiful Again”, which is a beautiful piece, or—apologies for this, Madam Deputy Speaker; do not get overexcited—“Kiss Me, Kiss Me, Cover My Body In Love”, which is another great work.

The Liverpool artist Chila Kumari Singh Burman’s work often uses neon. I went to an extraordinarily wonderful exhibition of hers at the Imperial War Museum North, which had large amounts of neon, drawing on her family’s tradition of running a shop. Members may recall that a few years ago she covered Tate Britain during the winter period with lots of different neon signs. For that matter, people can go online—this is my advertising for the Tate—and buy one of her tiger or ice cream neon works for £950. For that matter, at Tate Modern there is Martin Creed’s work, “DON’T WORRY”. It is difficult not to sing, “Don’t worry”, is it not? A few years ago at Tate Britain, the Welsh artist Cerith Wyn Evans did an extraordinary piece, which I really remember, because it was such a contrast with the galleries it was in. It was 2 km of neon light. That was back in 2017.

The creative industries as a whole, as my hon. Friend will know, contribute £124 billion a year to the UK economy, and neon, as a niche but important part of that ecosystem, has a dual role in commerce and in our culture. Advertising is one of our key exports in the UK and an important part of our creative industries, too. We need just think of the Piccadilly Circus signs, God’s Own Junkyard, or the glow of a fish and chip shop on a rainy Tuesday night. These are not just signs, but signifiers of place, of character and of British eccentricity. They are things that imprint themselves in our memory as part of what we think of as our own home town.

I hear the call today for consumer transparency and greater support—the point was well made—whether through planning protections, trademarking or cultural preservation funding. Under existing legislation and guidance, there are provisions in place to protect unique aspects of our historic environment, including street furniture and signage. Indeed, the entrance range of the Walthamstow Stadium, with its fabulous neon sign, is grade II listed. Anyone can recommend a building, site,

monument, designated landscape, battlefield or, indeed, sign for inclusion on the national heritage list for England, so long as they meet the eligibility requirements. I encourage people to do that.

I hope the House will allow me—apologies again for this—to cast a light on my Department’s work on living heritage. I encourage neon crafters to make a submission to the inventories of living heritage in the UK when we open the call for submissions later this year, following our incorporation of the convention last year. That is a fantastic opportunity for the neon craft community to advocate for their craft, raise awareness and be part of a wider conversation on living heritage.

Let me also address another point that my hon. Friend made, which was about sustainability. She is right that some people have incorrectly expressed concern about energy use by neon, when modern neon is far more efficient than its reputation suggests. When maintained, it outlasts LEDs, is recyclable and in some cases is even repairable.

On consumer transparency and the use of the term neon, I fully understand the concern that clearer definitions and protections could help prevent confusion for consumers and help preserve the value of handcrafted neon signage. We have only to go online for two or three minutes to find lots of different supposedly neon signs being advertised relatively cheaply, which are no more neon than they fly in the air. They are sometimes described as “LED neon signs”, which is a contradiction in terms. I fully take on board the point that my hon. Friend has made, and I

thank her for bringing this matter to our attention as we engage with Departments across Whitehall on their trademark policy development. This is not solely a matter for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

As I said earlier, protecting neon is not about nostalgia. It is about supporting livelihoods, unlocking tourism, and giving our public spaces character at a time when homogenisation threatens to reduce the character and unique identity of everything from our skylines to our high streets. The Government hear the case being made for neon signage, not as a gimmick or an indulgence but as an essential, flickering thread in the tapestry of British creativity. We hear the concern from artists, from heritage bodies and from communities who want to see colour, identity and local pride preserved. We are committed to working with industry, local government and the wider public to explore how best to secure the future of this unique form of creative expression. On this, we will not let the lights go out. As the Greek-born American neon artist Chryssa once said,

“I saw Times Square with its light and letters and I realized it was as beautiful and difficult to do as Japanese calligraphy.”

We should never let go of such artistry in our British traditions.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Illuminating!
Question put and agreed to.

10.21 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 6 May 2025

[CLIVE EFFORD *in the Chair*]

Parking Regulation

11.30 am

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered parking regulation.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I thank the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) for his support in securing this important debate. I also thank my hon. Friends the Members for Darlington (Lola McEvoy), for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) and for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson)—my good friend and constituency neighbour—for their tireless work in challenging the rip-off fines that private parking companies across the country are charging our constituents day in, day out. Irrespective of industry pressure, we will continue to fight on behalf of our constituents who face unfair parking fines. I also thank the RAC and the AA for their ongoing work to advocate for drivers across the country.

I will keep my contribution brief to allow other Members to speak for their constituents. I know that MPs are here from across the country and across party lines because their constituents, like mine in Derby, are fed up. They are fed up of wrestling with a faulty payment app or an out-of-order ticket machine only to find that they will still be fined. They are fed up of the hassle of appealing a parking fine that should never have been issued in the first place. Most of all, they are fed up of feeling scammed by private parking companies that are unfairly pocketing their hard-earned cash.

In my constituency, the Copeland Street car park is a repeat offender, ripping constituents off—both workers and visitors—with unfair fines. Do not just take my word for it; listen to my constituent who fell foul of unclear signage while doing jury service at Derby Crown court. He will now have to defend himself in court against fines in excess of £1,000. Another of my constituents is a member of Derby's community with hearing difficulties, who uses the car park to attend essential hearing appointments. After receiving an unfair fine, he is understandably worried that this will happen again and again.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order. Please refrain from mentioning any matter that may be sub judice.

Baggy Shanker: Another resident contacted me and said:

"I'll probably just pay the fine without contesting it, because the hassle of appealing would be too much."

The data shows us that those people are sadly far from alone. Although almost one in two motorists who appeals gets their fines cancelled, 80% of private parking fines are paid straight away. A lack of proper regulation has written these companies a blank cheque to collect unfair fines. According to insurance company Churchill's data, they are on course to make 15.4 million requests to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency for vehicle

records this year. That is a record average of more than 43,000 private parking tickets issued every single day—one every two seconds. Shockingly, 2,700 will be issued during the course of this debate. It is time to say enough is enough and introduce a legally binding code of practice, to put an end to the extortionate fines.

Earlier this year, I wondered why private parking companies introduced a voluntary code of practice, after years of doing everything they could to block a legally binding code of practice being introduced. To nobody's surprise, the voluntary code goes nowhere near far enough to stand up for drivers and give them the protections they need. The cap on parking charge notices is still too high. The debt recovery fees are still allowed under the industry code. Put simply, they are setting their own rules and marking their own homework, or at best their mates' homework. That is just not good enough.

Private parking companies need to act with fairness and common sense. To achieve that, we need a robust code of practice put into law, which stands up for drivers and holds these companies to account. Voluntary guidelines are failing drivers. We need clear, enforceable rules that cover signage, the grace period, appeals processes and the use of CCTV. We also need to put an end to the threatening letters that use legal jargon to intimidate people into paying fines, and we need caps on those fines. Ultimately, we need accountability.

I wholeheartedly welcome the Labour Government's determination to drive up standards across the private parking sector by committing to publishing a statutory code of practice. Today, on behalf of every driver who has faced the nightmare of an unfair fine, I urge the Minister to commit to introducing such a code without any further delays. Most importantly, the emails that flood our inboxes every day show that drivers across the country are willing us to stand up for them. Now it is time for action.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): I remind Members that they must bob if they want to speak in this debate. A lot of people want to speak, so if anyone intends to intervene, they should prepare their interventions carefully, because if an intervention is too long I will cut you off.

11.36 am

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I congratulate the hon. Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) on leading this debate, which has been a collaborative effort and is beautifully well attended.

Many private parking companies aim to make their record-making profits from the demands they issue via penalty charge notices, not being satisfied with their advertised parking fees. There is no incentive for them to operate fairly, to make PCN rules straightforward or clear, or to run a genuine appeals process. This model has worked on intimidation and threats, with the companies knowing that a fair proportion of people will be intimidated into paying. The process rapidly escalates into debt collection threats and solicitors' letters. This cycle of threatening letters, which are often referred to as threatograms, tends to continue regardless of appeals or evidenced facts.

The companies will point to their own independent appeals processes; however, such processes are neither independent nor fair. In fact, they are run by the trade

[*Martin Wrigley*]

associations: the British Parking Association and the International Parking Community. These organisations are directly funded and directed by the private parking companies, the biggest of which are owned by US private equity groups. For too long, this industry has been allowed to set its own rules and mark its own homework, always at the expense of the motorist, and the RAC and AA agree.

There is a legitimate need for parking management to prevent abuse, but costs and tactics are out of proportion to any legitimate aims. Primary legislation already exists to create a truly independent regulator. We urge the Minister to progress the consultation on the existing draft code of conduct and set up the new regulator that is clearly necessary. These private parking companies are out of control, causing misery for far too many motorists. It has to stop.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): In Horsham town, in my constituency, we have a central car park outside a Sainsbury's, which is operated by a third-party contractor. The number of disputed tickets is out of control. Does my hon. Friend agree that the voluntary code of practice, which was introduced last year, seems to have made absolutely no difference? I can detect no reduction in the difficulties being created.

Martin Wrigley: I agree with my hon. Friend.

I have spoken to a former employee of one of these private parking companies who was dismissed for whistleblowing. In my constituency of Newton Abbot, I have received numerous complaints about the behaviour of some private parking companies and the tactics they use, which include breaching data protection rules by hiding data and failing to comply with subject access requests. They have created a culture of “charge first, think second” and their default position is to refuse appeals. They also use equipment that is designed to be awkward or even to fail, such as machines that will not take cash or card payments, and then they deny appeals, arguing that drivers could have paid by app. They “double-clock” people coming in and out of car parks more than once, even if they have paid for tickets. One victim of this practice appealed and won because the company involved could not provide evidence to support the charges that had been made, but it took the company a further six weeks to cancel the charges.

Other tactics include deliberately targeting people who do not respond to their threatening letters, which are often issued with the wrong address or similar, and selecting them for court action. The companies know that these people are the most likely not to turn up, thus obtaining a default judgment, and that the cost of setting aside a county court judgment is greater than paying it off. There is also a constant use of trumped-up bailiff charges, many times the price of a normal parking fine.

In my constituency, Norma, an elderly driver, forgot to display her blue badge. She received a PCN for £100, which she paid but appealed. She was not offered the discount rate applicable under the company's own code until I intervened.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) for securing this debate.

At least four unpaid carers attending weekly Dementia Matters meetings in Brecon have been fined. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is more that we can do to protect unpaid carers?

Martin Wrigley: Absolutely—this is something that they should not have to put up with.

Norma felt bullied into making the payment to avoid threats of escalation. Complaints go into a flawed process: appeals are simply denied, and the supposedly independent appeal system acts as little more than a tick box, with no real opportunity to argue reasons. This is immediately followed by continued threats of enforcement, action and increased costs—and it goes even further than that.

Private parking companies seem to have licence to go much further than any other form of organisation. Why can such companies set up automatic number plate recognition or CCTV, have cameras literally hidden on any old building—often really high on outside walls—to film entire streets and into the houses opposite, and have them running 24/7 with a 360° view using night vision, when councils or the police would never be allowed to do such a thing? Why are private parking companies allowed to use such cameras with no restrictions, especially when councils cannot use them at all for off-street parking, since the Deregulation Act 2015 banned camera use for parking contravention in council car parks?

We urgently need an independent regulator. The public need information on how the camera systems are used and who is recording. We need to ensure that the appeal system is working, and that faulty parking machines are rapidly fixed. We need a cap on the maximum penalty charge that can be issued for contraventions. We need a proportionate and responsible debt recovery process for operators to use for non-payments, and we need responsible behaviour and transparency from the companies operating in this area. Critically, a new regulator will provide a single code of practice, so that all private parking operators follow the same rules, and a single independent appeals process.

In 2010, indiscriminate wheel clamping and towing on private land was described as a licence to print money due to the firms' rogue conduct. The practice was banned by the local transport Minister, the then Liberal Democrat MP Norman Baker, who said:

“The rules governing parking on private land should be proportionate and should not result in motorists being intimidated or forced to pay excessive fines.”

Rather than the private parking lobby and finance world learning its lesson, it reverted to an industry based on outrageous practices, charges and threatograms. Let us end this situation. I ask the Minister to take urgent action.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): I am going to have to impose a three-minute limit straight away, I am afraid.

11.43 am

Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. The issue we are addressing today is symptomatic of a country where people who have done everything right are being burdened and bullied by a system that is weighted against them. I want to use this debate to tell the stories of some of my constituents in Darlington, and to outline why I am urging the Government to take action to regulate the private parking industry.

The reason people are so enraged by this issue is because it is a microcosm of people's broader experiences. What was once an ordinary, day-to-day, unremarkable occurrence has been allowed, through the incompetence of the last Government, to become a truly unacceptable experience for ordinary people. While many simply pay the fine, for a lot of people in Darlington an unexpected bill of £170 really affects their budget.

I pay tribute to the people who have shared their stories; it has helped me greatly in my conversations with Ministers, colleagues and the companies. Each of the 140 people who have reached out to me since I was elected has been treated unfairly, and I am confident that they are just the tip of the iceberg nationally. I am convinced that we absolutely must regulate private parking companies, and that action is long overdue.

The car park that the majority of my constituents have complained about is situated right next to the Darlington Economic Campus, which houses the Treasury. While I was visiting that car park in my first week, a man using a wheelchair was trying to use the machine to pay for his parking. It had taken him longer than five minutes to get to the machine, so he had missed the window to pay without a fine. He was rightly shocked and angry about the unfairness of the rule. The fact that I witnessed him getting caught out in real time convinced me, there and then, that this was happening so frequently that something had to be done. Ten months later, the five-minute rule has been stopped, but we need to go further to protect people. We need proper reporting, proper regulation and an independent ombudsman for appeals, and we need it quickly.

Many Members will be familiar with the story of Hannah Robinson. She received a staggering £11,000 in parking fines from a single company across 67 tickets. In every case, she paid for her parking. Her only fault was that she did not do it within the five-minute window set by the operator. Often that was not even possible. Machines did not work, phonelines were unresponsive and the internet signal was too poor to pay online. The five-minute rule has now rightly been banned following campaigning efforts by MPs such as my hon. Friends the Members for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) and for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson), whom I have been proud to work alongside. However, Hannah and others like her should never have been charged in the first place, or dragged through legal proceedings or forced to fight ruthless companies to prove they had done nothing wrong.

Another Darlington resident, Kim, had her life completely knocked off course for parking in the same facility. Like Hannah, she paid for her parking but was unable to do so immediately because of technical issues. She was sent a £170 charge, but she never received the letters. Completely unaware of the issue, she received a county court judgment. Her credit score collapsed. She and her partner were both working full time, doing the right thing, and were blocked from getting a mortgage. The fact of the matter remains: we must take action on this issue, as it is long overdue.

11.46 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank the hon. Members for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) and for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) for setting the

scene so very well. Not a week goes by in my constituency when I do not have complaints from those with parking tickets, so I wish to register my concerns.

Parking regulations in Northern Ireland are managed mostly by the Department for Infrastructure. It is the relevant agency to issue parking tickets, to which I am no stranger on occasion. A lot of the referrals I have every week on behalf of constituents relate to the Department and to private companies. In the financial year 2023-24, the Department for Infrastructure issued approximately £7.4 million-worth of penalty charge notices, commonly known as parking tickets, which perhaps highlights the scope of issues concerning public parking regulation in Northern Ireland.

First of all, machines are not working and people still get tickets. Secondly, payment facilities are not working. Thirdly, disabled bays are not always marked correctly with lines on the road or signage, and people may get a ticket for something that was there in the past and is not there now. People may also be just minutes, or seconds, over their time limit. Disabled people coming back in wheelchairs is an example.

Here's a cracker—that was something that used to be said. One of my constituents complained to me one day. They went to a shopping centre—I will not mention which—and when they went in, there were no lines. As soon as they came out, there was a line painted right around the car. The paint was so fresh that there were spatters of yellow over the car, and guess what happened? They got a parking ticket. You could not write that story. We fought the case, and to be fair, the company withdrew the fine, as it should have. It should never have happened. What the—it would be unfair to say that; I do not want to use bad language.

I am under time pressure. These are the issues in my constituency of Strangford. I have heard of resident permit parking schemes that have been introduced in some areas across Northern Ireland. For example, Belfast has a system with a £30 annual permit to allow people to park in designated bays. There are ways of doing it better. I know the Minister is a good Minister—he answers questions and always tries to be constructive. There are methods whereby we can move forward, and a bit of common sense and flexibility would help. The Minister is always keen to have discussions with his counterpart in Northern Ireland, so will he tell us what is happening in relation to that? Regulations sometimes differ between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, so I ask him to tell us what has been done in those talks to work together better.

11.49 am

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I thank my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker), and my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy) for the work they have done on this issue.

I am not the only Member to have people stop me in the street or message me to tell me how angry and frustrated they are at having to fork out for penalty charges in circumstances they think are wholly unfair. I have been there myself: as a mum of three, I have had to get my children out of their car seats, pull out the pushchair, unload the bags and try to ensure they do not run out in front of oncoming cars, all to the chorus

[Catherine Atkinson]

of one or more children trying to get my attention—the usual juggle. Try finding a working payment machine or downloading an app when you are the only thing standing between children and soft play.

When I read about the case of Rosey Hudson, who was taken to court for nearly £2,000 of unpaid charges because she had not paid within five minutes, I became really keen to raise this issue in Parliament. The cases that have been raised with me have involved not just those caring for young children, but people with mobility issues, and machines not working. One person could not even find a parking space and was still charged.

Unlike Rosey, not everyone feels able to stand up and contest the fines. Many are put off by the threats of legal action and are worried about going to court. Of the 3.8 million private parking tickets issued in just three months last year, 80% were uncontested. When I convened a roundtable with MPs, car parking firms and consumer groups, I was asked what a fair time limit would be, but if a person pays for the time they have parked, there is no loss to the car park, so they should not face penalty charges. I am glad that the time people have to pay has been doubled to 10 minutes, but the only way to have a fair system is to have a statutory code. We want to protect drivers from unfair practices, plain and simple—particularly given that the number of parking tickets issued to motorists has nearly doubled since 2018.

Lola McEvoy: Does my hon. Friend agree that the sheer volume of parking tickets could be having an impact on people's desire to visit our high streets and town centres, as they worry about parking without getting fined?

Catherine Atkinson: I completely agree. Firms hand out more than 43,000 parking tickets to motorists every day—one every two seconds. In line with what my hon. Friend said, I acknowledge the important role that private car parking plays, especially in our city and town centres. I want people to shop in our brilliant independent shops, such as those on Sadler Gate. I want people to be able to go to our fantastic restaurants, such as Lorentes, BEAR, the Dining Room and the Bookcafé. I want them to visit Derby theatre and our brand new 3,500-capacity performance venue, Vaillant Live. We need to ensure that when people use private car parks, they do not feel ripped off.

11.53 am

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Parking regulations are not about where we leave our cars, but about how we shape our communities, support our local economies and respond to the climate crisis. When done well, they should enhance our communities, not stifle them. They should be not a revenue source, but a planning tool to balance environmental priorities, support active travel and nurture vibrant neighbourhoods. They are not about declaring war on motorists; they are about our public spaces, which belong to us all. The Liberal Democrats have proposed a national framework for fair parking standards, with clear rules that ensure transparency in permit pricing, protections for small businesses and common-sense exemptions for essential workers.

My Bath constituency is a beautiful and bustling city, but it is under pressure. Narrow Georgian streets and high visitor numbers mean that space for parking is in high demand. Parking regulations must be implemented fairly, with safeguards for lower-income households. Let us not forget the digital divide, which we have already heard about. As we move towards app-based payment systems, we must ensure that no one—especially the elderly or vulnerable, or those struggling with their kids—is left behind. We call for a requirement that all parking areas retain alternative, accessible methods of payment. Many of my Bath constituents—we have already heard about this issue this morning—have been hit with disproportionate fines from private operators, especially around retail areas and tourist hotspots. We need stronger regulations, and a binding code of conduct to prevent abuse and to ensure that all enforcement is appropriate and clearly communicated.

Today, we are calling for a review of private parking enforcement. Too many of my Bath constituents are being caught out by unclear signage and unfair fines, while appeals processes are skewed against individuals.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): Constituents of mine in Yeovil have been given unfair fines at car parks run by Parkingeye, Excel Parking and Euro Car Parks due to unclear signs, faulty ticket machines, bad apps and poor road markings. Does my hon. Friend agree it is clear that private parking companies cannot be trusted to regulate themselves?

Wera Hobhouse: Indeed. We have already heard this today, but we must have a mandatory code of conduct. I have one constituent who was hit with a £100 fine by a private company, despite having spent the entire time parked in the business that owns the car park. When she went to the Independent Appeals Service—as some people dare to do—the review stated that the charge was in the region of £85, when it was actually a lot higher. That also raises questions about the quality of the appeals process. It is high time that we brought private parking more fully under statutory regulation, with a code of practice that puts fairness first.

11.56 am

Patrick Hurley (Southport) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. The Government were elected back in July on a mandate to put more money into working people's pockets. However, almost as soon as that money goes in, those same pockets are being picked by the increasing costs of just living their daily lives. One of the most egregious culprits is the private parking industry. On average, 41,000 new private parking fines are issued each and every day. We are on course for more than 14 million this year alone. That is an issue that affects pretty much every motorist in the country, whether through being fined themselves or worrying that they will make a mistake and that they are at risk of being fined.

I will tell a couple of stories from my constituency just to illustrate the argument. First, we have Katie Lovett. She parked at the private car park near the railway station but was not sure how the payment machine worked, so approached someone on duty for help. This is what she said when she wrote to me, as her words are far more powerful than anything I could write:

"I received a letter from a debt company in March of this year telling me I had a parking fine of £170 for parking longer than I paid for at the London Street NCP carpark in Southport in January. I've never parked here before and even asked a gentleman if I paid on arrival or exit and he told me you pay on exit by putting your registration number in and paying the amount shown. This is exactly what I did although I found the whole process very complicated."

After a lot of back and forth, she ended up paying the fine because:

"It turns out it was my fault because unbeknown to me you have to put the length of time you've been parked for in the machine when you pay. So I only paid for one hour and not two."

Katie is not alone because, secondly, we have an issue with the Ocean Plaza car park near the beach. One of my residents went to the shops there a couple of months ago—parks up, does his shopping and gets a letter two weeks later to say that he had been parked for three days, four hours and 38 minutes. It was an obvious mistake, but it took the intervention of my office before the parking firm would admit it.

Even I have been caught out. I do not particularly class myself as a shrinking violet on this, nor do I think I am any less competent than the average person when it comes to dealing with these issues; but when someone like me gets a £100 fine through the post, God help the average motorist, who is just trying to navigate the complex multitude of different regimes and approaches. There needs to be standardised regulation in this area, concerning issues such as signage, grace periods, appeals processes and complaint handling. There needs to be a consideration period, so that people can make an informed judgment about whether to accept the terms and conditions.

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that private parking firms are running a racket in this country by adding debt recovery fees on top of already expensive parking fines? Will he join me in urging the Minister to bring forward the new regulatory code as soon as possible and ensure that it includes the ability to prevent the addition of bailiffs' charges on top of already expensive fines?

Patrick Hurley: I agree completely. The £70 uplift that the recovery firms are charging is indefensible.

For repeat offenders in the industry, there needs to be a statutory code of practice. It should include the power to remove a company's access to the DVLA register of keepers, meaning that operators who fail to meet the standards of the code would be prevented from enforcing unpaid parking charges and would therefore effectively be unable to do business. Lastly, the Government need to stop the private operators issuing and enforcing fines due to inadequate signs, broken machines, faulty ANPR cameras and simple mistakes around dealing with the technology. I await the Minister's remarks with interest.

12 noon

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): In rural areas such as West Dorset, public transport is limited. Unfortunately, a car is not a luxury; it is a necessity. Our current approach to parking is outdated and increasingly unfair. At Dorchester South station, a lack of parking provision has become a source of real frustration, with drivers forced to park in surrounding residential streets, sometimes blocking access to emergency vehicles or

cutting off neighbours in their own driveway. Some beach car parks have been privatised, pushing up charges and limiting access.

Where parking is available, payment systems increasingly discriminate against older people and against those without smartphones. Apps require good signal or wi-fi; large parts of West Dorset have neither. The use of apps and the withdrawal of cash or card options effectively exclude some of the most vulnerable people in our community, including older residents.

West Dorset experiences a dramatic increase in population during the summer, with up to 42% more people during peak months. It puts a huge strain on beach car parks, residential streets and protected natural areas. There must be parking to account for those swells in population, so that it is not our roadsides and verges that pay the price. That is why the Liberal Democrats are calling for the creation of an independent car parking regulator, which would help to ensure national standards for appeals, signage, access and fairness. It would provide much-needed oversight of a system that currently operates with too little accountability and far too much inconsistency.

Hospital parking is another area in which urgent reform is needed. Research by the Liberal Democrats has found that NHS staff, patients and visitors have paid out £1.15 billion since 2018 in car parking fees. More than £300 million has come from NHS staff: people who are caring for others under intense pressure are being charged to go to work. We believe that this must change. We are calling for a visiting and caring fund to reduce parking costs for NHS workers and ensure that patients are not penalised for needing treatment or seeing loved ones.

What we need is a parking system that works for those who live in West Dorset, for those who visit and for those who rely on fair and safe access to work, healthcare and community life. Until that happens, we are letting down far too many people.

12.2 pm

Abtissam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) and the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) on their excellent speeches.

This is not a marginal issue, but a systemic one. It touches the lives of millions of motorists and contributes to the erosion of our high streets and of public confidence and belief in a fair process. Constituents continue to be harassed, penalised and financially extorted by a private parking industry that has operated largely unchecked for over a decade. In my constituency, I continue to receive complaints about one particular operator, which has become notorious. I am extremely disappointed that it has failed to respond to queries raised by my office. The scandal is that there are many motorists who pay up even when they should not have been issued a fine at all. The companies are known to use intimidatory methods to press people into paying high fines. People pay because they do not want the aggro.

I have a number of stories from constituents, but because time is short, I will share just one. Leila told me that she parked in the Broomhill Excel car park for a hairdressing appointment. There is no coin machine, so people are wholly reliant on the app. On that occasion, the machine did not work, but she kept trying for

[*Abtisam Mohamed*]

17 minutes and eventually the payment went through. She thought nothing of it until she received a letter stating that she was liable to pay a fine of £100. She worried that the payment had not gone through, but she checked her statement and it showed that it had. She therefore confidently appealed, thinking that it was an oversight on Excel's part. She was aghast to learn that her appeal had been rejected because, per its policy, she was seven minutes late. It erroneously states that there is an alternative payment source; there is not. It is wholly reliant on the app, which was not working at the time.

Catherine Atkinson: Some car parking firms still believe that their code of conduct is enough—the code of conduct that they decide and that they police. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need a statutory code of practice so that car parking is straightforward, convenient and fair?

Abtisam Mohamed: I agree: the private parking code of practice is not fit for purpose. Will the Minister explain whether the Government will consider reintroducing the official private parking code of practice as soon as possible? Will he also consider the immediate suspension of DVLA data access for any operators found to have engaged in predatory practices or information misuse?

Our constituents cannot continue to face this unjust system. The only winners under the current system are the private parking companies that are profiteering at the expense of the public.

12.5 pm

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) and the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) for securing this debate.

Like many Members here today, I have received complaints from constituents, but I am mainly here because of Janice, who came to my surgery to tell me her story. Her son tragically passed away from cancer in 2023. After his diagnosis, Janice and her husband went to seek support from a local cancer charity. They struggled to access the building, so they pulled over briefly to call for directions; they then went on to get the support that they needed. It was only when they returned home that they received a £60 fine for allegedly having parked on the side road. Understandably, Janice contested the fine, explaining the situation. The company that issued the fine states on its website that it will reply to challenges within 28 days, but Janice heard nothing. She then received a letter saying that the fine had doubled.

Sadly, Janice's experience is not unique. At Norwich railway station, taxi drivers were outraged to keep getting fines for supposedly staying over the time limit. The CEO of the taxi company says:

"If taxi drivers are facing such issues despite having tracking data to challenge the fines, what about regular commuters and visitors who lack the resources to contest these decisions?"

I am pleased that in that case the parking companies reviewed all the fines, but it should not have come to that.

The common denominator is a parking industry with free rein to do whatever it wants. Where drivers park and how they pay for their parking is a lottery. As many

Members have pointed out, it can exclude many people. It is obvious that the voluntary code is not fit for purpose. I fully back the calls for a legally binding code of practice backed by the law, so that we have a fair system with a cap on parking charges, with clear professional standards, with complaints handling and with a single independent appeal system. I add my voice to those of colleagues in this room and across the parties calling for immediate action.

12.7 pm

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) and the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) for securing this debate.

The RAC estimates that 14.5 million drivers will receive a parking fine this year. That is more than one in three drivers in this country. In the Derbyshire Dales, I have heard time and again from residents that private parking companies sometimes employ tactics akin to bullying and intimidation, many of which have been eloquently outlined in this debate, to get them to pay unjust fines. It has clearly become widespread: just 2% of drivers state that private parking firms treat fairly those who contravene parking rules.

I will share a few stories from the Derbyshire Dales that highlight the severity of the issue. Rachel Betton is a constituent of mine who was dropping off her grandchildren at a trampoline centre in Derby; I believe it may be the same one that my hon. Friend the Member for Derby South mentioned. Rachel never even parked, but she was charged £60 by Excel Parking Services for entering the car park. Like many constituents, Rachel felt that she did not have the time or energy to appeal, so she decided to pay the fine despite feeling that it was unjust. Unbeknownst to her, however, her payment never went through, leaving her to pay an increased fine of £170.

Other constituents have had the same negative experience with the same company. Kathleen Jackson, who is 76, told me that she was fined £170 after it took her over 10 minutes to figure out how to use the machine. The machine has now been replaced due to serious functionality issues, but that has not stopped her having to pay the fine.

The issue is particularly problematic for disabled constituents, who often need more time to get to parking meters and pay for parking. One such constituent, Claire Ashbrook, has told me that she has been left feeling particularly stressed because she does not have the money to pay the fine, as she is caring for her sick daughter. These stories demonstrate that the private parking companies cannot be allowed to mark their own homework.

Although it is welcome that a voluntary code of conduct has now been introduced, it is voluntary. Only a statutory code of conduct will ensure that private parking companies are held to account. For the good of my constituents, I ask the Government to consider implementing such a code as soon as possible.

Several hon. Members rose—

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order. Because you have all been so disciplined, and because one Member who had emailed about speaking in the debate is now not

planning to do so, I can be a little more flexible with time, but not too much. You have roughly four minutes each from now on.

12.10 pm

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. It is clear from this debate that there are systemic weaknesses in how the private parking system is structured and regulated. That is the core issue that I wish to address.

One of the two DVLA-accredited trade associations is the International Parking Community. Members of the IPC are granted access to DVLA data to pursue unpaid parking charges. If a constituent receives a penalty charge notice from an IPC member, they are directed to appeal via the Independent Appeals Service, a body accepted by the DVLA for the purpose of handling appeals.

Although the IAS is an accredited alternative dispute resolution provider, it is not directly run by the Government. The word “independent” may lead consumers to believe that they are appealing to an impartial Government-run body, but the IAS operates independently of both Government oversight and parking operators. The International Parking Community and the Independent Appeals Service are both trading names of one company, United Trade and Industry Ltd. This overlap raises legitimate concerns about perceived conflicts of interest, as the same corporate entity that profits from private parking companies through membership fees is responsible for overseeing the code of practice and adjudicating disputes under it. This lack of separation, clearly, could undermine trust in the fairness of the process.

The IAS asserts that its independence is safeguarded by its use of qualified solicitors or barristers as self-employed adjudicators, all of whom remain anonymous, are duty-bound by their professional codes and are paid fixed fees regardless of appeal outcomes. It is also true that individuals retain the option of appealing a PCN through other means, such as in court, under consumer protection legislation. However, for the average citizen, and particularly for someone without time, resources or legal understanding, the impression of full independence created by the Independent Appeals Service’s name could easily be misleading. At a minimum, the current framework could contribute to a perception of bias and could foster a lack of public confidence.

These are precisely the issues that a Government private parking code of practice needs to address. I therefore look forward to the Minister setting out the progress that the Government are making in addressing the issues. I hope to hear about the progress to be made in how private parking is enforced, to ensure greater oversight, consistency and fairness.

12.12 pm

Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) and my hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) on securing this important debate, and so many others on campaigning on this issue.

I speak on behalf of the people of Weston-super-Mare, Worle and the villages. Our proud coastal community has stunning beaches, three glorious piers and a tourism

and hospitality sector that plays an essential role in our local economy, but parking is a growing problem that is echoed across communities up and down the country. Far too often, the cost and availability of parking acts as a barrier, deterring visitors, frustrating local businesses and making it harder for residents to enjoy the very places that they call home. The issue has been hugely compounded by unscrupulous private parking companies, especially in recent years.

In Weston, we want both locals and tourists to come and enjoy our seafront and our high streets. We want them to visit our small businesses, our events and our attractions, but when a family find that parking for a day at the beach can cost as much as their fish and chips, they think twice. They might not come at all. The prospect—so often reinforced by these unscrupulous companies—of unfair and unclear fines further exacerbates the issue. We need to dramatically rethink our approach to parking regulation in coastal areas. That goes further than having a code of practice for private regulators; it is a wholesale issue about how we reinvigorate our town centres generally.

We must see cheaper and more flexible parking options, particularly during peak season, when towns such as Weston thrive on day visitors. Those might include capped daily rates, off-peak discounts, or partnerships with local businesses to validate parking. Too often, we have seen a “computer says no” attitude when such initiatives have been suggested, and far too often we are told, “We’ve outsourced this to private companies rather than innovating in-house.” Governments can make local decision makers shift their thinking on the subject.

Accessibility is also key. We have heard a lot about people with disabilities, older people, and those with Parkinson’s, such as my mum, who has been stung by parking charges simply because she cannot access the app or she does not do things quickly enough. Often, those are the people most at risk of extortionate fines, which are so out of proportion with the perceived error. It is not just about convenience; it is about fairness.

Lola McEvoy: In Darlington, there are car parks with no signal, so people have to go outside to download the app, log into it and then pay for their parking, by which point they have often incurred a charge. Does my hon. Friend agree that in our code, we should include the provision of multiple payment methods in every car park?

Dan Aldridge: Absolutely, and this goes to the heart of a lot of what we have talked about in this place in respect of the shift to a digital-first world. In many ways, that is great, but it excludes so many people. We need to continue to have other options, including cash payment, available for people who need them.

Coastal towns face unique economic challenges. Hospitality and tourism are two of the few industries that we rely on in Weston. If visitors are put off before they even step out of the car, or are punished by opportunistic private parking companies, we all lose out—local people, shops, cafés and attractions alike.

Let us be clear: better parking regulation is not about free-for-all parking; it is about sensible, locally driven policies that work for both residents and visitors. It is about supporting coastal regeneration by making it easier, not harder, for people to spend their time and

[Dan Aldridge]

money in our towns. Let us make it easier for people to get to our town centres, and for our communities to thrive.

12.17 pm

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. As MPs, we all have a massive volume of casework that is generated from constituents who have come to us with concerns about parking charge notices. My constituency of Mansfield is no different. There is a real sense of anger among local people.

Common complaints that I have come across include problems with parking payment apps, payment machines that are out of order or not functioning properly, difficulties speaking to a real person to query a PCN, and, in particular, PCNs that have been issued wrongly because automatic number plate recognition systems have malfunctioned yet it is possible to prove payment. I have also dealt with many cases in which someone has purchased a ticket but has simply incorrectly entered a digit from their registration number into a tiny payment machine keypad. Many constituents, particularly those with visual impairment or those who are older, have come to me about that.

One company in particular, which manages the St Peter's retail park car park in Mansfield, has been the subject of hundreds of complaints to my office. I have since met representatives of the company in Parliament, and I am pleased that they have agreed to make numerous improvements, including installing new payment machines, and to refund a large number of PCNs.

However, I still have many reservations about the conduct of car parking companies in my constituency. From my observations, it appears that many companies are intent on generating as many PCNs and as much income as possible, and putting up as many barriers to appealing as possible—for example, not having staffed telephone lines, or insisting that appeals must be made in a very specific manner. Charge income is increasing at a record rate, while the number of vehicles on British roads is increasing only minimally. Clearly, something is going wrong. We seriously need to consider why that is the case and look at the regulatory framework under which parking companies operate. Many operators have told me that they are British Parking Association approved and they adhere to the code of conduct and practice, but that is a voluntary code created by the car parking industry, as the British Parking Association is a membership organisation funded solely by the car parking companies themselves.

It seems to me that these companies act as judge and jury in the regulation of their industry, and I think enough is enough. My constituents in Mansfield demand that we in this House scrutinise these companies and decide whether further action is needed. I therefore urge the Government to look into the matter and to consider statutory regulation as a priority.

12.20 pm

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker), the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley)

and other colleagues for securing this important debate, and I thank all Members who have made contributions illustrating something that is a scandal across the whole country.

I want to highlight how my constituents in Shipley are being ripped off with a number of cases that are impacting both residents and shoppers. I spoke to a constituent who lives at Victoria Mills, a beautiful residential development in the heart of Saltaire. He has been trying to register his vehicle with the company that operates the residents' car park, BaySentry. It has him down as owning two cars and two spaces, neither of which has the correct registration details, so every time he enters or exits his car park—sometimes two or three times a day—he is issued with a fine. The website is extremely difficult and confusing to use. Although he has been contacting the company, which keeps saying it will respond in three days, he has still had no response. Having clocked up several thousands of pounds in fines owed, he has decided to move out. He knows that other residents threatened with the same sort of penalty notices have paid up because they are too scared, as we have heard today.

Another constituent overstayed slightly at a supermarket car park, but saw that the signage was extremely poor and submitted evidence to that effect. She went down the route of appeal using POPLA—Parking on Private Land Appeals. That pretends to look like an independent appeals process, but, as we know, these are not independent processes; they are paid for by the parking companies. She has got into dispute with POPLA, which is not progressing her appeal. This is really undermining people's confidence in parking.

The third case study is that of Susan, who has a happier story. She was shopping at the new Lidl store—she was there 30 minutes before opening time to use the browsing time before the store opened on a Sunday—and she received a fine from Parkingeye. She paid the fine and went to appeal, but got no joy from the company. It turned out that Parkingeye was not up to date with the store opening times, and it should never have fined her as she was not there out of hours. Thanks to my intervention on her behalf, we got a small victory: the cameras were updated and she got her money back.

It should not require the intervention of MPs with these private companies to stop this rip-off Britain. It seems like the companies have a blank cheque and are exploiting law-abiding residents of my constituency and people around the country. I hope the Minister will respond positively to my call and that of colleagues for properly independent regulation and clarity for consumers, and a legally binding code of practice.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): We now come to the Front-Bench speeches, which I would like to finish by 12.58 pm so that the mover of the motion has the opportunity to sum up the debate.

12.24 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) and the hon. Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) for securing the debate. I know from my personal experience and that of my constituents that private parking can often feel like the wild west. Extortionate

fees, poor signage, outrageous fines and an often opaque and unjust appeals process are too often the norm. As one can see from the attendance at the debate, it is a real issue across the country—although oddly not in many Conservative constituencies, it seems. In the words of the AA, private parking operators often act as “shark-like businesses”. I consequently welcome today’s debate and the opportunity it affords to shine a light on this issue.

Some of the stories we have heard are appalling. The time has come to stop wringing our hands and do something about the issue. That is why the Liberal Democrats are calling for the introduction of an independent parking regulator with appropriate power to regulate fees, enforcement and appeals. It is vital that national standards are introduced to protect motorists and ensure transparency across the system.

Mr Tom Morrison (Cheadle) (LD): Trust in parking companies is so low that more and more motorists are moving to on-street parking, including in Heald Green, where nuisance parking outside high-footfall businesses has caused much concern among local residents. Does my hon. Friend agree that more needs to be done to encourage holistic parking strategies, to ensure that motorists and residents get a fairer deal?

Mr Kohler: I completely agree. We need a parking system that works. We are not against parking; we are against abuse of the parking system.

It is beyond doubt that the status quo is allowing private companies to act with impunity, preying on the millions of motorists in this country who rely on private car parks to go about their everyday life. As we heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Newton Abbot, for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and for West Dorset (Edward Morello), and the hon. Members for Darlington (Lola McEvoy), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson), as well as many others, many of these companies use underhand tactics to increase the fines charged and county court judgments issued. It is simply not acceptable. As the hon. Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) said, it is rip-off Britain.

As the hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (John Whitby) noted, the RAC has said that private parking operators are on track this year to hand out a record 14.5 million fines, each costing the recipient up to £100, and potentially more if they dispute or delay payment. Many fines are not for genuine infringements; they are simply devices to raise money, with little to no scrutiny by the Government. As the hon. Members for Derby North, for Derby South and for Shipley noted, some of our constituents face fines that soon escalate to many thousands of pounds. It is truly shocking. Such situations simply should not be allowed to happen.

The Government must urgently stamp down on the abuse of the parking ticket system. In addition to the establishment of a fully resourced and empowered regulator, a clear national code of practice must be reintroduced to promote transparency. Will the Minister confirm when the code of practice will be reissued? We also need a robust independent appeals body, as the industry’s own processes clearly are not working. As the hon. Members for Derby South, for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) and for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes) said, many motorists simply do not bother to appeal, as the process is so difficult and time-consuming.

Lola McEvoy: On the appeals process, constituents across the country are attending court to find that their hearing has been cancelled by the company at the last minute. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is a waste of their time and a waste of the court’s time?

Mr Kohler: I do. These companies use tactics simply to increase their profits and our frustration, and to make people impotent in the face of their abuses.

Even when individuals take the trouble to appeal, the process is opaque and impossible to navigate, as the hon. Member for Mansfield (Steve Yemm) so eloquently noted. I have experienced that myself. When one of my constituents got in touch about an incorrect parking penalty notice from Britannia Parking, it was well-nigh impossible to find the contact details of the company, while the links it provided to appeal did not work.

The Liberal Democrats stand for fairness and accountability in the private parking system. Although we welcome the Government’s promise to introduce a code of practice, as always the devil will be in the detail. We must scrutinise the new code when it materialises, to ensure that motorists are properly protected from rogue parking firms. We remain of the view that the Government should go further and introduce a regulator with appropriate powers to enforce the code of practice and put an end to the abuse.

12.29 pm

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank the hon. Members for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) and for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) for securing this important debate. As we have heard from across the Chamber, there are many examples of rogue parking companies. Before I begin, I will just note that this is my first opportunity to reply to a debate on behalf of His Majesty’s loyal Opposition—not bad for a boy from Broxbourne—so please go easy on me.

Luckily, both I and my constituents have plenty of experience of dealing with parking problems—as do many Members across the Chamber, as we have heard, with passionate contributions from Members on both sides of the Chamber, including the right hon. Member—sorry, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon); he should be a right hon. Member. It would not be a debate in this Chamber without him in attendance. I noted down many comments from Members across the Chamber, but I will not go through them; I will just say that I heard nothing that I disagreed with about these cowboy parking companies. I think everyone has agreed with everything that everyone else has said and that action needs to be taken on rogue parking companies.

Parking is a crucial part of everyday life, but too often it is overlooked because it is not a glamorous political issue. When parking is too hard to find, too expensive or just too complicated, it can have a ripple effect on the local economy and the basic quality of life of all our constituents. I would like to make a number of practical points to the Minister and I look forward to the Government taking constructive steps to make things easier and better as soon as possible.

Although Labour’s manifesto failed to mention parking—its priorities clearly lying elsewhere—the Conservatives pledged to roll out the national parking platform fully, ending the ludicrous situation of someone

[*Lewis Cocking*]

needing one app on their phone to park in one car park, another app to park in the car park down the road and so on. A single payment system would make paying easier, especially for older people. The Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), said in February that options were being explored with the parking industry to deliver that platform, so let me ask today's Minister: how are those discussions going, and when will we see action on that matter? Can he confirm whether the funding for the pilot version of the national parking platform ceased on 31 March?

While making parking easier for drivers, there is a balance to be struck between making simpler regulations and protecting pedestrians and local residents. At the last election, we promised to give councils the power to ban pavement parking if they so wish, provided that they engage with businesses and residents first to ensure that they are not adversely affected. It is incredibly frustrating for pedestrians to find their path blocked by inconsiderate cars; for those with disabilities or young children in prams, it can mean the choice between a dangerous detour and not continuing their journey at all. My sister has used a wheelchair to get around Hoddesdon and sadly has been forced into busy roads too many times.

At its most serious, inconsiderate parking can be a matter of life and death. I am sad to say that in my Broxbourne constituency there was a case in which an ambulance was unable to reach a person experiencing a 999 medical emergency, with paramedics having to run down the road because cars were parked too closely on both sides of it. In my previous role as the local county councillor, I was able to respond immediately by putting in place practical double yellow lines to ensure that that could never happen again, while ensuring that parking was still available.

Alice Macdonald: I totally agree with the hon. Member on the challenge of pavement parking, particularly around the times of the school run. There was a consultation on the issue in 2020, and I hope the Minister will be responding to it. May I ask why the Conservative Government did not respond to the consultation and take action on some of these areas?

Lewis Cocking: We did try to implement some of the recommendations from the consultation; the courts and the private companies that threatened legal action were the reason why we could not do that. I hope this Government will answer those questions and reply to that consultation, as the hon. Member rightly says; I would not go near a primary or secondary school in my constituency during school pick-up and drop-off time. Sadly, it is often parents taking their children to school who are parking dangerously, and that affects other children going to the same school. We must do something about that.

I firmly believe that councils and councillors, who understand their local areas, should have the power to tackle inconsiderate parking. The Minister speaks about devolving more responsibility to local authorities. Will that include the power for local authorities, if they so wish, to ban pavement parking?

When it comes to parking, local people also need a say from a planning perspective. In my constituency, a new development has been proposed with just 17 spare spaces for 80 flats. If only half those flats contain two people—a couple who both drive—spaces will run out very quickly indeed, forcing more cars on to already full neighbouring roads.

Baggy Shanker: Although the shadow Minister raises some really important issues around school parking and parking on pavements, does he recognise that this debate is focused on the operations of private parking companies, which are ripping off so many of our residents, and that we should not dilute that message?

Lewis Cocking: I politely say to the hon. Gentleman that if he will wait, I am coming on to that point in my speech. There are a range of parking issues that all affect this situation.

The issues around planning and getting the right number of parking spaces are already evident in Marsh Close in my constituency. Constituents there have written to me to share their frustrations about struggling to find space to park close to their home—why? Because not enough cars were catered for when the development was built. The Government's new national planning policy framework expects parking to be integral to the design of new housing schemes. That is vital and should be applied in every new development. Almost every development I see needs more parking spaces, so the Government must prioritise it.

Constituents have also been in contact to tell me stories of dreadful treatment by the handful of rogue parking companies, as we have heard from Members from across the Chamber today. Outrageously, Parkingeye has repeatedly sent threatening letters to one of my constituents, demanding money, without even providing an explanation of why they had received the fine in the first place.

Across the country, 14.5 million parking tickets will be issued to drivers this year. Too often, parking firms deliberately work to fleece motorists for as much money as they can, with misleading and confusing signage, aggressive debt collection and unreasonable fees. That must stop. The Government must get a grip on these cowboy operators, stop this war on motorists and deal with the other parking issues that our constituents are always contacting us about.

12.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Efford.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) and the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) for securing this important debate and for the spirit and intent with which they both spoke. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate.

I must say that I am generally not one for diary policing colleagues, and I always say to constituents that the number of people attending a debate does not always reflect the amount of feeling that exists about an issue. However, it is clear that both my hon. Friend and the hon. Gentleman have tapped into a real issue, and the range of colleagues present, of different political

persuasions and from around the country, shows that. Something my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy) said particularly stuck with me: I think that all colleagues have experienced, as I have myself, being contacted by frustrated, angry and upset constituents—good people, who go about their days doing the right thing, but end up battling a system that is not only seemingly unresponsive to their challenges, but is actually set up to challenge them and indeed to trip them up.

My hon. Friend the Member for Derby South and the hon. Member for Newton Abbot spoke about the strength of feeling that exists about this issue, but they provided a purposeful and solution-focused approach to lead the debate, which has stood us in good stead. In the contributions that colleagues have made, they have clearly set out the “rap sheet” and the frustrations of their constituents, and I will respond to those points shortly. I hope that their constituents, and indeed constituents from around the country, can hear their voices in this debate; they have been very present.

I have a little more time in which to speak than colleagues did, so I will start by saying, as they perhaps would not have had time to do, that there is an intrinsic importance and value in private parking. Parking is important for our motorists and, as some colleagues alluded to, it is also important for the resilience of towns, cities and communities across the country. People want and need—and must be able—to use their cars to do their shopping, attend medical appointments, go to work and take their children to the activities they need to go to.

As the hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) said, in many areas across the country, people are totally dependent on their cars and rely on the consistent and available provision of good-quality car parks. All our communities in our towns and our cities rely on having a mix of transport options, of which privately managed car parks are an essential element. That is how important and fundamental car parks are.

If we individualise some of the challenges that exist, such as a number being keyed wrongly here or an overstay by two minutes there, parking might be seen as a granular challenge, but actually it is a hugely significant issue for the vitality of our communities. Like other colleagues, I have heard from those who represent the private parking industry, who say that 99% of the time there is a quality interaction, but we have heard stories in this debate that show that is too often not the case—and too often for seemingly avoidable reasons.

I am grateful to hon. Members for setting out their cases. I am also grateful to those colleagues who highlighted that the issue is on the rise. We heard about the scale of it: as colleagues said, between 2012 and 2022 there was a near 500% increase in DVLA vehicle keeper data requests. Something must be done. As other colleagues said, a parking charge will be issued every two seconds during this debate. The system must be fair, and it must ensure that motorists can park without fear of an unfair charge.

I will speak a little about what we intend to do as a Government shortly, but colleagues have set out an important road map—if hon. Members will excuse a totally unintended pun—for different improvements that could be made to the system. First, the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Patrick Hurley) mentioned the

clarity of the rules. My hon. Friend raised an important point about his assessment of his own capacity to comply or otherwise with rules. By instinct, I want to follow the rules to their fullest—I definitely do not want to get fined—but they can be difficult and unclear, and they ought not to be. They ought to be something that anybody can comprehend and follow.

Similarly, my hon. Friends the Members for Derby South and for Shipley (Anna Dixon) talked about the importance of signage. It is important that that is not seen as a hurdle to clear—an invisible hurdle, something that people could have known if only they were 15 feet taller. There has to be fairness in ensuring that people know how to follow the rules.

The systems themselves also have to work, as my hon. Friends the Members for Derbyshire Dales (John Whitby) and for Mansfield (Steve Yemm) said. Kimberley, in my constituency, is in a dip, so it is often very hard to use the app because there is no connectivity. The systems have to be ones that people can access and use.

My hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (Dan Aldridge) talked about proportionate responses, so that, if people do not follow the rules, the penalties are fair and relate to the transgression. He also made important points about what parking can do in a tourism context. Like him, the last thing I would want is for someone to come to my constituency—perhaps to enjoy Nottingham’s fabulous night-time economy—and for the one thing they remember to be, “Oh, but I got a parking ticket, didn’t I?”. Those things stick, so the system has to be fair and transparent; if it is not, there is a knock-on impact.

My hon. Friends the Members for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald) and for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes) talked about an appeal system. This is fundamental. People must be able to exercise their right to a fair hearing. People must also have confidence in the appeal system. Otherwise, they will not use it, and the virtuous feedback loop that is created when the appeal system demonstrates to operators areas where there might be challenges—why are they getting a lot of appeals on a specific car park? Is there a signage or technology issue?—gets lost.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) mentioned access to the DVLA database. The database is accessible where there is reasonable cause, which underpins the system. I say to her and other colleagues who expressed concerns that there can be consequences for operators who misuse the system.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about Northern Ireland. This is a devolved matter, but I reiterate a commitment I have given to him in relation to a number of other issues, which he very kindly mentioned: I talk to my counterparts in the Northern Ireland Executive frequently about a variety of issues, and I am always keen that we learn from each other. There are sometimes good reasons for doing things differently, but we must not create a lack of clarity by doing wildly different things. It is always interesting to hear what they are doing, and I am always keen to borrow the best of what is going on across the UK.

Like a number of other colleagues, the hon. Gentleman also mentioned a local example from his constituency of the importance of political pressure in getting the right thing to happen. I think particularly of the five-minute

[Alex Norris]

cap issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson) and the constituent who was fined £2,000. Similarly, my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington mentioned the significant fine—a matter of public record—given to one of her constituents. Reading ahead to where I am going here, colleagues will know that pressure by hon. Members meant that that system was changed under the voluntary code of practice. That is a good thing, but that is not how a system ought to work.

Similarly, in my community we had a number of complaints about the same car park. A member of staff from my office went and saw that one of the cameras had been knocked, so they were getting duff data. We were able to get that changed. That may have to happen sometimes, but that is not a system that is working. It should not rely on politicians intervening in individual cases to change policy. We can and will do much better.

I want to reiterate—or iterate and then reiterate, perhaps—to colleagues our commitment as a Government on this issue. I hope colleagues have seen my strength of feeling on this issue. We are committed to taking action to protect motorists and drive up standards in the private parking industry. We have a helpful bit of support from previous Parliaments in that. I think that, other than the hon. Member for Strangford, only you and I, Mr Efford, will remember the Parking (Code of Practice) Act 2019, which started as a private Member's Bill tabled by Greg Knight. That was a good use of the private Member's Bill process.

The 2019 Act places a duty on the Government to prepare a code of practice containing guidance about the operation and management of private parking facilities. However, doing so was an exercise that confuddled four previous Prime Ministers and five Secretaries of State—one of them twice—not to mention goodness knows how many Ministers. The process was too slow and too chaotic. As the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking), said, the Government tried in 2022 but then had to withdraw the code of practice. I give the clear commitment from this Dispatch Box that as a Government we will deliver.

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): What timeframe is the Department working to? I am not the only Member present who has asked that question, and it would be helpful to get confirmation from the Minister.

Alex Norris: I suspect that my reply to the hon. Lady will be the same as I have set out previously to a number of Members, either via written question or in correspondence. The timeframe is coming in due course. I will talk a little more about that, because we are having an important debate. We want to get this right, and I am aware of the potted and challenging history in this space. We want to get it right this time, and we are committed to delivering a code that recognises the importance of this issue to motorists and gets it right for them.

The Department meets regularly with the AA, the RAC and other consumer groups, which have done such important work in this area, to ensure that the code we publish will act in the best interests of motorists and addresses their concerns. As would be expected, we have talked to the accredited trade associations—the

British Parking Association and the International Parking Community—to ensure that we do not inadvertently make life harder for motorists along the way. I assure Members that we will engage with the issues that have been raised with the Department as we work towards publishing the code.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): We have talked about the impact of parking practices on particular towns, and I am concerned about some of the towns in the Tyne valley, where a lot of effort is being made to preserve the local environment and clean air, and to drive down car use and promote the use of public transport. Northern Rail has just brought in paid parking at Stocksfield train station, which has dramatically impacted the local community and caused a lot of concerns about future on-street parking in residential areas. It would be good to know that the Government are considering those kinds of moves from train companies, which will ultimately have a damaging effect on local communities.

Alex Norris: My hon. Friend's intervention shows that there needs to be, at the heart of this Government's work, stronger local say about the full transport balance. The goals that he talks about are those of many of his constituents, who are the experts in ensuring the right balance. Whether that is in regard to bus services or planning, as raised by the shadow Minister, we want to ensure that the tools are in the hands of local communities, so that they can lean in and plan at a community level the amenities and assets that they need collectively.

Lewis Cocking: Will the Minister assure us that he will go back and look at the national planning policy framework, to ensure that local development plans include enough spaces? I regularly visit developments in my constituency, and every one needs more parking.

Alex Norris: I am slightly loath to start a speech on the national planning policy framework—not least because I think you will smite me down, Mr Efford—but I have heard the hon. Gentleman's points. We have of course consulted on the NPPF, and have published our changes as a result of the consultation.

On the code of practice, our goal is to find a proper balance to ensure that parking charges and debt recovery fees are fair and proportionate, while providing an effective deterrent against the small number of people who deliberately do not comply. We intend to publish a consultation shortly—and I do mean shortly—to outline where the Government are and give everybody a chance to share their views. I encourage colleagues from across the House to take part—as always, I am available to meet any and all to hear their views—but I cannot say strongly enough that it is coming shortly.

Martin Wrigley: I hear stories of places like Cornwall council being so strapped for money that they are considering sub-letting all their parking spaces to independent private parking companies, which will run them for nothing other than the fines they will take from tourists visiting Cornwall and residents. Does the Minister agree that this issue is urgent? I do not hear urgency in his timescales. I repeat the request for a specific timescale for introducing a code of conduct.

Alex Norris: I appreciate that this is an urgent issue—that was a feature of all Members’ contributions. I ask the hon. Gentleman to bear with me when I say “shortly”. At the risk of getting into a debate about what is short and what is urgent, all I can say is that we want to get on with this at the best pace we can. We want it to work, deliver and hold up. Last time, in 2022, it did not survive its first contact with reality. We will publish the code shortly, but I ask for a bit of trust that I am getting on with it at the fastest possible pace.

This has been a valuable debate, and I am grateful for the challenges that colleagues set out. I have heard them clearly and they will form part of my considerations as Minister. I hope that the constituents who have had their voices brought into the room feel that they have been represented. I hope those who think, “Well, this happened to me too, and boy am I frustrated about it,” appreciate that change is coming. I very much look forward to delivering that change.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): I call Baggy Shanker to sum up for a couple of minutes. That is not an invitation for a seven-minute speech.

12.52 pm

Baggy Shanker: I thank all Members from both sides of the House who took part in the debate. As enlightening as their contributions were, it was really unfortunate to hear so many stories of residents across the country who have been subject to fines and such poor tactics and behaviours from private car parking operators. That needs to stop.

I am grateful for the Minister’s response. He recognised the issues and challenges, and committed to take action. He said he will take a bit of time to ensure we get the regulation right, because it has to be sustainable once it is implemented. I welcome his commitment to start a consultation process shortly. Enough is enough, and we need to protect our residents from rip-off fines. As I said earlier, over the length of this debate about 3,000 more fines have been issued.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered parking regulation.

12.53 pm

Sitting suspended.

Energy Resilience

1 pm

Tom Collins (Worcester) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered energy resilience.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I submitted this motion before the power failures at Heathrow and the Iberian peninsula, before the latest run of cyber-attacks, and before international conditions led us to increase our spending on defence. A more volatile and uncertain future is changing the question that we expect our energy system to answer but, as an engineer who spent years working on low-carbon energy technology, I know that the question changed before that.

The question changed when offshore wind became our cheapest source of electricity and when the payback period for photovoltaics dropped below just a handful of years. The question changed when the world woke up to renewables and we, an island nation with exceptional wind resource, favourable geology and a skilled energy sector, realised that we could become a clean energy superpower.

The prize is lower bills, increased security and the re-industrialisation of our economy, with all the jobs, innovation, trade and growth that come with it. To win that prize, our electricity system will need to double in capacity, accommodate dispersed, wild and unpredictable generation, and support varying demands that will become more mission-critical for our economy and everyday lives.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing the debate forward. Whether we like it or not, we must be aware of and consider these important matters. The Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 established that the Department for the Economy must ensure that at least 80% of electricity consumption is from renewable sources by 2030. Unless we can harness reliable tidal energy, we are dependent on conditions that cannot be predicted. That must be considered.

Tom Collins: Yes, diverse energy sources will be critical for future system resilience.

The Minister has clearly shown that the operational constraints for a robust electricity grid are known and in hand. The challenges of a future electricity system go far beyond those we face today. Three quarters of a century ago, when our energy systems were built in the shadow of world wars, resilience was front and centre, but the guiding star was efficiency, ensuring that energy taken from the ground was transferred with minimal loss. The defining challenge of tomorrow is to take energy that appears in places and at times determined by the weather, and deliver it in places and at times determined by the people who depend on it.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): I was delighted that Bethlem Royal hospital in my constituency recently secured a £725,000 grant from the Government to install solar panels. Does my hon. Friend agree that when used in partnership with back-up generators for essential services, on-site renewable energy generation will protect organisations from rising costs and provide greater energy resilience for their non-essential services?

Tom Collins: I agree that with the correct technology, those systems can provide local resilience.

The fundamental change to the core role of the energy system has been from efficiency to storage. How we achieve that future system is already well debated. We start with energy efficiency and insulation, then we move on to shifting the time of demands, and we can enhance that with intraday storage in some buildings. The way we actively control and manage the response to demands and our storage is the big question for the future electricity system.

Currently, moment-by-moment control is achieved technically using the A/C power itself as a signal. Control over longer time bases is co-ordinated and partially directed through markets. In the future, we expect markets to play a bigger part in our electricity system, working in shorter timeframes and in a more distributed way. When we think about resilience, the design of our economic and commercial energy system and the digital systems that enact it will be absolutely critical. The commercial energy system will be as critical as the physical one.

Whereas markets may be good for some resilience attributes such as flexibility and diversity, they are often bad for others, such as redundancy, continuity and headroom. Also, our new digital communications channels offer potential single points of failure for our system. This is a fundamental question of national security. In the light of a string of cyber-attacks, it is crucial that when our digital world fails, our heating, lights, sanitation and vehicles must not. Either our grid must not depend on signals such as dynamic pricing to keep working, or those signals must be multiple-fault tolerant. With distributed generators playing a larger role in future, avoiding cascade failures requires them to support graceful degradation instead of disconnecting in the face of uncertainty.

This dynamic, digitally enabled future can introduce other risks, not only for resilience but for social equity. It must not penalise those who cannot afford battery storage, and each internal system boundary and each new pricing location threatens overall value. Alongside markets, our systems must incorporate core features that function primarily in the public interest. The system must be resilient against market-induced price instability and commercial failures, both for our security and for those markets to function healthily.

That all misses the single largest and most novel component of our future energy system: clean, long-duration energy storage at scale—storage, not just for seconds through inertia, not just for minutes through demand-side response, and not just for a day or night through in-building storage, but intraweek and longer to ride through long stagnant weather events or other major disruptions. Today, our energy resilience is assured by the incredible flexibility and capacity of fuels: oil in transport and off-grid heat, and methane gas for heat in buildings and industry. Those fuels intrinsically store energy indefinitely and carry vast amounts of energy through simple infrastructure, such as pipes and tanks. Our gas system currently carries three times as much energy each year, and up to four times as much in a day as our total electricity system. It shares its energy storage capability with the electricity system through gas power stations, our core electricity resilience assets. We have found our dependency on gas to be a weakness, but only because we depend on it for our system's strength.

So, we face a crux. How might we win the energy resilience prize, benefiting from the clean versatility of electricity and the stabilising, security-critical storage capability of fuel? There is one answer that the UK has itself pioneered. There is a fuel that is carbon-free and 100% interoperable with electricity, and capable of being manufactured from electricity and cleanly converted back into it again at will: hydrogen. The Government, and others, have spotted the unique potential of hydrogen to fuel a clean and secure future for British industry. I would argue that they could go further, enabling industrial renewal in and around national clusters, but also in our towns and suburbs. As we seek to secure a material supply chain, the UK could deploy our immense wind resource and become a circular economy material recovery superpower of Europe.

Over recent years, however, the debate has become paralysed by an either/or question. Electrification and hydrogen have been presented in some sectors as mutually exclusive. Hydrogen has been presented as scarce and expensive. Policy has been asking whether the answer in various sectors is electrification or hydrogen, but the design answer is resounding and simple: it is both. These two energy vectors are complementary, with hydrogen power stations able to provide our grid with headroom, responsive generation and inertia, and hydrogen storage able to provide our national asset of inter-day and inter-week energy storage. Our future electricity system needs hydrogen, and at a vast scale. The truth of the matter is that hydrogen will be as cheap and abundant as we design it to be.

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. The Dorset clean energy super cluster, in my constituency, has proposals for fixed and floating offshore wind, carbon capture and storage, and hydrogen storage. Does my hon. Friend agree that having all that energy generation and storage in one place is a really effective way to boost Britain's energy resilience, and to quickly boost our energy infrastructure and our ability to create, store and distribute energy here in Britain, rather than being dependent on energy coming in from overseas?

Tom Collins: I thoroughly agree with my hon. Friend. I am so glad that Members have identified how critical it is that we have a diversity of energy sources, that we have energy storage, that these are distributed around our system, and that we invest ambitiously now to bring them into reality.

Our energy system has always been multi-vector, and it must be in the future, too. By embracing this reality, we have an opportunity to design and choose how our electricity and gas systems are coupled: upstream through underground gas storage and power stations; mid-system with smaller distributed generators, including fuel cells; downstream in areas on constrained legs of the network; or perhaps even in homes through smart hybrid heating systems. We can deploy hydrogen production wherever it is most helpful: offshore, onshore, or at critical nodes in the transmission system. Pipe infrastructure is relatively low cost, high capacity and, being underground, intrinsically secure.

The size of our supply of green hydrogen is our choice. If we choose constrained supply, we choose constrained growth. If we choose ambition and abundance, that will also be worked out in our economy. It is time to

move on from old ways of thinking. There is virtually no risk of stranded assets; investment in both electrical capacity and hydrogen production is zero regret. The call to action for both sectors is simple: go big. That is, and must remain, the message of the Government.

Now is the time to convert this ambition into concrete goals in the technical domain. Industry's voice is clear: there is an urgent need for decision making. We must deliver our ambition not by iterative cycles of consultation, but rapidly through partnership. We need to short-circuit policy silos, get all the stakeholders in a room and thrash it out. We must be open to answers that back multiple technologies. Our problem is not that we need a silver bullet, but that we had one that was literally too good to be true. Moving on from fossil dependency means diversification.

Historically, we have always relied on multiple energy vectors in homes to provide energy resilience. That is still an option now. It means moving away from questions of either/or to answers of both/and. Those decisions are not easy, but they can be made. The end point is not crystal clear, but it is sufficiently in focus. Our industrial community has the knowledge and evidence we need, and the risks from here can be managed.

This is a moment for leadership and, fortunately, this Government have the will and the opportunity to deliver it. As corporate players scramble to shape this debate to create future opportunities, investors are seeking a clear statement of ambition and for the Government to get hands on, set goals and pick winners. Recognising that there will be more than one winner in a diverse and resilient future, we can show ambition now for electrification and a powerful UK hydrogen economy.

In the end, a resilient energy system is about putting people first and making power, warmth and movement dependable, affordable and accessible to all. Seventy-five years ago, the UK built energy systems with world-leading reliability and resilience. Now it is time to do it again, and to secure a new era of economic renewal, growth and security. With ordinary people as our guiding star, through ambition, pragmatism and practical collaboration, we can deliver an energy that, for the next 75 years, through night and day, come rain or shine, dependably keeps every single person in our fantastic nation empowered.

1.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): Thank you, Mr Efford, for chairing this debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Tom Collins) for securing it and for all his experience in this area, which is of great value to me and the Government. It is an important topic. I will speak more broadly about the issue of energy resilience, and then come to some of the specific points that he raised. As I said in the House last week, maintaining this country's energy resilience is a key priority for the Government. As my hon. Friend rightly pointed out, it goes hand in hand with us taking, as fast as possible, the opportunities from new technologies on our path to net zero.

In the context of the widespread power outages experienced across the Iberian peninsula last week, this debate is particularly timely. I praise my hon. Friend for his significant foresight in securing the debate many weeks before both of the incidents that he referred to;

that is a real skill that we might come back to. I will repeat what I said in the House last week about all those who were affected. We clearly saw significant disruption in Spain and Portugal on our television screens here, but I was glad that power was restored remarkably quickly.

My thoughts are with all those who were affected, and with those who are now carrying out the work to investigate exactly what happened. A significant number of unfounded claims and speculations have been shared by Members of this House, and across social media, about the cause of the disruption. Clearly, given it was such a significant failure, it will take time for the Spanish network operator to carry out an investigation into its exact cause, and it is important that we wait for that statement before rushing to any kind of judgment.

Turning back to the UK, Great Britain has a highly resilient energy network, largely because of how diverse it is. In recent years, although we have seen high energy prices, our energy supply has remained reliable because we are supplied from more than one source, including the UK continental shelf, our long-term energy partners such as Norway, international markets for liquefied natural gas and interconnectors to the European continent. That means that we are not reliant on any one particular supplier for security of energy supplies, and we are confident that the system operators have the tools that they need to effectively balance supply and demand in a wide range of scenarios all year round. As my hon. Friend set out, storage is also an important flexibility tool in the GB system, allowing us to respond to short-term changes in supply and demand, especially during colder months.

To further protect consumers, Ofgem sets annual targets on customer interruptions and customer minutes lost, which means that companies themselves are directly incentivised to reduce the number of interruptions, no matter the cause. Of course, I work closely with the National Energy System Operator and Ofgem to ensure that resilience is built into our networks wherever possible.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is an ever-present voice in these debates, is no longer in his place, but I wanted to give my regular response to him: although I take the issues of energy in Northern Ireland very seriously, they are devolved to the Northern Ireland Executive and not my immediate responsibility. I think he probably knew that that was what I was going to say anyway.

My hon. Friend the Member for Worcester raised our journey to net zero and what we need to do to ensure resilience as the system decarbonises. We are obviously committed to maintaining current levels of resilience and reliability through collaborative work with industry, the regulator and other stakeholders, and there is a variety of ways in which we can do that.

Obviously, the most common cause of any disruption in our network, here in the UK, is storms and weather events. We have seen lessons learned from storms such as Storm Arwen, which led us to introduce a number of resilience measures. There is also the role of critical new technologies, such as hydrogen, which my hon. Friend raised throughout his speech and can be used in energy resilience. He is correct, of course, that we now have an opportunity to design a clean energy

[Michael Shanks]

system, and that is why NESO is carrying out new functions that will shape resilience policies on our journey to clean power.

I will briefly talk about what we learn from incidents. Our system is remarkably resilient, but, of course, no system is immune from disruption entirely, so we must plan for all eventualities and learn from incidents when they happen. We do that through working closely with the energy industry to ensure that robust plans are in place. We learn from every incident, in strong partnership with others.

My hon. Friend rightly raised the dependencies in our energy system. The recent example from the Iberian peninsula really brought home just how much our lives are dependent on electricity in one form or another. The point about our telecoms and communications systems, which are so reliant on mains electricity now, is really important for us to consider in these resilience plans; we must make sure that we have back-ups in place. That complex interdependency was also demonstrated by the recent fire at the substation in Hayes, which resulted in the closure of Heathrow airport. Such incidents are incredibly rare, but they occasionally occur in a complex system with many thousands of assets, such as ours.

The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero continues to lead cross-Government work with the Cabinet Office to enhance the resilience of all critical sectors to major energy risks, such as those listed on the national risk register. Events in the Iberian peninsula last week, as well as those in Heathrow in March, highlight just how crucial electricity is to our wider system.

My hon. Friend the Member for Worcester was right to point out that, as we move to a clean power system, the question of storage will be key. That is why I was delighted the Government announced the funding to build the first long-duration energy storage assets in more than 40 years. We have worked to set out the cap and floor scheme so that major infrastructure projects can be delivered. We look forward to those projects coming forward in due course.

My hon. Friend highlighted the role of hydrogen. Although I am not directly responsible for hydrogen, I am as excited by the opportunities it presents as my colleagues in the Department are. It can play a key role in our mission to make the UK a clean energy superpower by delivering new clean energy industries. Although it

can provide near-zero emission hydrogen, particularly green hydrogen, as my hon. Friend said, it is not yet available at scale, but there is a real opportunity. He made the point about trying to bring people together to recognise that this is a really exciting opportunity and moment. It is everything that the Government are about through our approach to delivering the clean power mission and unlocking the potential of these more nascent technologies to provide significant resource into the future. That is an important point to put on the record. We are very supportive of what hydrogen can do in our system in future.

This is a very important debate. The question of energy resilience is one that we will return to, quite rightly, because it is never a settled subject. The Government have credible plans in place that we test robustly at regular intervals to make sure that, in the unlikely event they are needed, they work as we intend. It is clearly important that we revisit them regularly to make sure they are as detailed as possible.

I reiterate the point that I made in the House of Commons last week: the UK has a secure and resilient energy supply. Our mission to make Britain a clean energy superpower is the best route to improve our energy security into the future. When we have experienced incidents that threaten our energy resilience, we have used those as opportunities to prepare better for future threats. Preparing for outages is an ongoing task that Government, industry and the regulator collaborate on. We are also taking this opportunity to build not just the clean power system that will deliver climate leadership, energy security and bring down bills in the long term, but the storage assets and everything necessary to make sure we can capture clean power and utilise it when we need it most.

Once again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester not just for securing this timely debate and the points that he has made on storage and on hydrogen in particular, but for all the work that he is doing generally in Parliament on these really important issues. As we progress towards clean power by 2030 at pace, rapidly deploying new infrastructure, we will continue to work with all those in the energy sector to maintain the high levels of resilience and security that this country needs.

Question put and agreed to.

1.22 pm

Sitting suspended.

Dedicated Schools Grant

[DAWN BUTLER *in the Chair*]

4.30 pm

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): I beg to move, That this House has considered the Dedicated Schools Grant.

It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I thank the f40 group for its assistance with this issue, as well as all those in attendance, including the Minister, whose presence is greatly appreciated. I bring this debate forward on behalf of the headteachers, teaching staff, support staff and young people across Gloucestershire and the other local authorities that are among the lowest-funded councils by the Department for Education across England.

In its 2024 manifesto, Labour pledged to “transform our education system so that young people get the opportunities they deserve.”

There is a clear alignment between that and the Liberal Democrats’ commitment to increase per pupil funding above the rate of inflation every year. Our goal is to support all pupils and expand educational provision, not to shift resources away from more disadvantaged counties like Gloucestershire. Schools in my constituency are faced with increased pressure right now, owing to the inequitable dedicated schools grant, combined with the rising cost of special educational needs provision.

Consecutive Governments have failed our children. With short-term mindsets, they have not adequately resourced education through which our children could otherwise go on to boost every workplace across the country. Those Governments left our children to emerge into a country where every public service is crumbling, but in which they need a university degree to become a police officer. Brexit took away their access to Erasmus and left a bitterly divided society, which is still struggling to readjust following the covid-19 pandemic.

When Sir Kevan Collins recommended a £13.5 billion covid catch-up fund for our children, Boris Johnson’s Government fielded only one tenth of that figure, after thoughtlessly spending billions on botched contracts for personal protective equipment. Our children continue to suffer the consequences of that decision through a mental health crisis; an explosion in demand for special educational needs and disabilities provision; and almost a million young adults not in work, education or training. I entered politics because I believe in fairness. Whatever else we do in this place, I believe there are two routes through which we can improve the future of our country—political, including electoral reform; and education, education, education.

Within every child lies the potential for greatness—the potential to solve tomorrow what seems impossible today. Our children represent our hope for the future. They are yet unburdened by the decades of dogma, societal pressure and institutional inequity that weigh upon us, and dilute our own potential. In every aspect of our lives, we must strive to prepare the ground ahead of them, and leave them a better country and a better world than was passed to us.

Our teachers recognise that more clearly than any of us. They dedicate their careers to the fulfilment of our children’s potential, because there is no more rewarding pursuit than to help others to develop. No salary compares to being thanked in the street by those you have helped,

and watching with pride as they go above and beyond what they imagined they could. Labour’s 2024 manifesto described teaching as a “hard-earned and hard-learned skill” and pledged to work to “raise its status.” I commend the observation that we are continuing to fail our teachers, and the commitment.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that teachers and teaching assistants in schools were the first line of defence against cuts to public services from the last Conservative Government, and that, when the Department for Education is asking schools to make efficiencies alongside the extra funding they have received, that means that some TAs will lose their jobs? Last week, in my constituency of Esher and Walton, I walked into a school on a visit and the headteacher had just had to let two TAs go because his school is facing a deficit of £200,000.

Cameron Thomas: I wholeheartedly agree, and will come to that point shortly. I hope my hon. Friend will pass on my empathy to her headteacher.

Our teachers are no longer simply expected to educate our children according to the curriculum. Governments and society continue to expect more and more of our already overburdened teachers. Increasingly, four-year-olds are being introduced to school non-verbal, unable to use cutlery, and sometimes wearing nappies—but those are just the headlines. Discipline, time management, self and social awareness, self and mutual respect, moral courage, honesty, work ethic, public service and charity are soft skills and attributes that should be introduced in the home and honed within society as well as at school. This Government, with honest intentions towards our children’s healthcare, now have teachers cleaning their pupils’ teeth—just one additional straw upon the camel’s back. It is no wonder that teaching assistant posts are vacated or lie empty when people can earn more working in the local supermarket.

I understand that fixing the education system will be complex and expensive, and that action must also take place beyond the scope of the Department for Education, but something that can be addressed now is a more equitable allocation of funding. This would go a long way to remedying the situation for many schools in Gloucestershire and elsewhere. The dedicated schools grant is the mechanism through which the Department funds local authorities, which in turn allocate their resources to the schools within their jurisdiction.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): One school in my constituency has a £100,000 bill due to the national insurance hike, which is resulting in redundancies. Does my hon. Friend agree that the national insurance hike is exacerbating the inequity that many schools face in our local communities?

Cameron Thomas: I entirely agree. I have long spoken out against the short-sightedness of the national insurance hike, and I will come back to the short-termism that I think it important this Government escape.

The dedicated schools grant is allocated according to the national funding formula, which is outdated and puts schools such as mine in Gloucestershire under increased pressure. Mainstream schools in the lowest-funded local authority receive £5,000 less per pupil per year than they do in the highest-funded authority.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): In Oxfordshire, we receive an area cost adjustment of just 2%—that is to take into account the difference in the cost of living in different parts of the country. In London boroughs, that adjustment reaches 18%. It simply does not match the cost of living in Oxfordshire, where house prices are comparable to those in London. Does my hon. Friend share my concern that this lack of funding is impacting the education of our children?

Cameron Thomas: As somebody who was—let us be generous—barely educated in Oxfordshire himself, I am very much aware of the issue.

My mainstream schools in Gloucestershire fall into the bottom 20% of DSG funding, earning £1,000 less per pupil than schools in the top 20. This means that Cleeve school, for example, with its 1,851 pupils, faces an approximate annual deficit of over £1.8 million compared with a similarly sized school in Middlesbrough.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I agree with all the points that my hon. Friend has made so far. This morning, I spoke to the headmaster of the Thomas Hardy school in Dorchester in my constituency. His previous job was at a London borough school in Croydon, where on average he received £10,000 per pupil; in West Dorset, that figure is £5,000. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government's funding formula for schools does not take into account the added costs of rurality and providing services in places like West Dorset and, no doubt, his own constituency?

Cameron Thomas: With such gravity, my hon. Friend says it better than I could ever hope to. The inequity is there for all to see, and it is interesting that one of his teachers has experienced both ends of that scale.

My four-year-old daughter and her friends will begin their primary school education in Gloucestershire in September. I want them to have, as the Labour manifesto put it, the opportunities they deserve. To me, that means the same opportunities as every other child—but by the time they finish their GCSEs under this inequitable system, the dedicated schools grant will have invested between £10,000 and £50,000 less in our children than in those elsewhere in the country.

The Government might point to an upward trend in the dedicated schools grant in Gloucestershire since 2021, but on the current trajectory, it will take 15 years to achieve equity. By then, my daughter and her friends will have long since left school. Unless the Government act now, their potential will have been diluted by the dedicated schools grant as is. By the time we achieve equity, according to trends based on the Government's own statistics, the vast majority of those teaching today will have retired. My headteachers have told me that, for most schools, approximately 85% of their funding is ringfenced for staffing costs, but that rises to over 90% in some particularly desperate cases.

The level of teaching experience in our schools is diminishing because our headteachers are having to make their most experienced and highly paid teachers redundant, so that they can recruit less experienced teachers on lower wages just to balance the books.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): In West Sussex, the deficit on our DSG grant is £130 million, and that will potentially double by next year. Despite that, SEND

provision, which is the main driver of that deficit, is deficient across the district. So many schools approach me on this subject. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to not only find a way to wipe out the deficit but remove the fundamental cause, which is the ballooning cost of SEND provision?

Cameron Thomas: My hon. Friend makes eloquent points. Clearly, the SEND crisis is exacerbating the situation to a significant degree. What we look for from the Government is a long-term strategic plan to deal with this, rather than just pushing it down the line.

Since 2014, mainstream schools have been required to contribute the initial £6,000 of additional costs for SEND pupils from their own core budget. Owing to the inequity in the DSG, it is easy to see why that has a greater impact on those schools in lower-funded authorities. Resources have become so stretched many teaching assistants are available only to support pupils with the greatest SEND requirements. Underfunded primary and senior schools are taking drastic actions to balance the books. One primary school head I spoke with spends his holidays in school, completing the tasks of a caretaker he can no longer afford to employ. Across Gloucestershire there is nothing left to cut. Headteachers are overwhelmed and cannot afford to meet the cost of any pay rise that may arise from the Government's negotiations with teaching unions. The impact of an unfunded pay rise, I have been told, would be ruinous.

I recognise that this Government inherited from the Conservative party an utterly broken country. That was a hospital pass but, almost a year down the line, my teachers remain on the frontline of a genuine crisis, to which they have been given no real answers. They do not have time for more politics as usual. They do not have another 15 years for this system to reach equity, nor do they need more short-termism. They need their Government to step up now with long-term solutions that do not simply pass the challenges down the line.

To support teachers and enable them to plan for the future, rather than simply stave off financial collapse, I ask the Government to review the national funding formula, and target funding to achieve near-term equity. Thank you, Ms Butler, for chairing this debate; I look forward to the contributions of others and the Minister's response.

4.43 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Butler. Let me start with a simple fact: Devon is one of the worst-funded education authorities in the country. For 2024-25, Devon receives just £5,484 per pupil—about £200 less than the national average and about £1,500 less per pupil than in inner London. I have experienced the difference through the eyes of the teachers I have talked to in Devon who have taught in both inner London and rural Devon, and who described to me the difference the funding makes. For an average Devon primary school, it equates to losing the budget for one whole teacher.

Devon is an f40 authority—one of the 40 lowest-funded areas in England. The national funding formula was supposed to level the playing field, but it has left schools in areas like east and mid Devon struggling. Nowhere is

the crisis more obvious than in special educational needs. Devon's high needs block allocation for 2025-26 is £125 million, but the anticipated cost of supporting SEND children is £172 million. Up to now that funding gap has been filled by the so-called safety valve, but I understand that we might not have that safety-valve relief from 2026. If we compare Devon's high needs allocation per pupil to that of a council such as Camden, we see a real disparity, as we do with Westminster, which receives £2,610 per pupil against Devon's £1,245 per pupil. Devon is being asked to deliver special educational needs provision on half the budget.

Let me share the story of one affected family. Kathryn Radley lives in Uplyme in the area I represent, and her daughter Sophia is autistic. At one point Sophia was offered just six hours a week of online education, and her family had to borrow money to keep that minimal support going when the council did not fund it. The education, health and care plan that was issued for her was unworkable, did not name a school and was not supported by any deliverable provision. Sophia, who did not misbehave or disrupt her class, and who simply needed specialist support, was left isolated at home with anxiety, and with no place in the system.

Devon currently spends £55 million on SEND provision in the private sector, which is not properly audited or scrutinised. Meanwhile, state schools in the area I represent, such as in Honiton, Axminster and Sidmouth, are crying out for more resources to support special educational needs—more teaching assistants, specialist hubs and early intervention services—but they cannot get them because the per pupil funding is far less than it is elsewhere. We therefore see teachers who are overwhelmed, too few teaching assistants and staff who prioritise behavioural cases over inclusion, meaning that many children like the one I described simply cannot cope.

Devon needs urgent and fairer funding for its schools from the dedicated schools grant. We need to expand local SEND resource bases and give mainstream schools the tools they need to include every child. Indeed, the Department for Education should give Devon's children the funding for education that they deserve.

4.48 pm

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I congratulate the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas) on securing this important debate.

For far too long, the state of rural and semi-rural schools has been forgotten, particularly in my part of Northumberland, where Northumberland county council, which is still run by the Conservatives, treats my part of the county with what I can only describe as tender contempt. The previous Government thought so little of my constituency that eight and a half years ago they built a school that is already deemed structurally unsafe. Students have had to be transported to another part of the north-east to continue their education. That is the context in which I situate my remarks.

Generations of rural students have been left behind. I thank the hon. Member for Tewkesbury for his circumspectness in his comments about the awful circumstances that the Government inherited. It is not possible to start any discussion of any policy without recognising that we received a generational hospital pass, as I think he put it.

Having grown up in a rural area, I know that there are foundational characteristics. I confess to not knowing too much about Gloucestershire, having not had the chance to go there much beyond, I think, one family funeral when I was about 10, but I am sure it is lovely. From what I can tell, Northumberland has a lot that is similar, including large distances to travel and restricted access to opportunities and services. I went back to my old high school recently to discuss some of the access to work schemes that staff there try to provide and some of the opportunities for younger people to get employment skills. The teachers are working every hour they get, but they are hamstrung by the lack of local bus routes and appropriate public transport, and the lack of employers with the capacity to take on apprentices or students who are in need of work experience.

For far too long during the 100 years my constituency had Conservative representation down here, the challenges were not given voice or addressed. That was the challenge, dare I say it, of being considered a safe Tory seat: people could vote for their MP but not get a voice as part of that. We need to do more to engender stronger ties between communities and schools, to ensure that those growing up in our communities do not have to search too far outside them to find the opportunities and jobs that they want to progress in life. Unfortunately, the reality for many students is that they do have to.

I will direct the remainder of my remarks to two particular schools. First, Haydon Bridge high school is an incredible school in a beautiful location—and I get to visit a lot of schools. Haydon Bridge is a wonderful town on the Tyne Valley railway line—although the railway could do with running on time a bit more—and it has a fantastic school with genuinely fantastic teachers. Unfortunately, when I visited I had to discuss the funding issues with the headteacher.

I would dearly like to see the new administration at Northumberland county hall put their hands in their pocket to do something about the state of the school, which has been underfunded for a long time. There has not been the political will, nous or leadership among the Conservative group in Morpeth to stand up for students in the west of Northumberland. The teachers at Haydon Bridge could not work any harder, nor put on more opportunities. They are always looking at how to make the school more attractive and at how they can drive employment and employability, but for far too long the voice of rural schools has been shut out of the national debate.

Prudhoe community high school was opened eight and a half years ago. It was built under a Conservative Secretary of State and Education Department, but it was closed due to cracks in the infrastructure. I have been working on that with the staff and the community in Prudhoe. It would be a struggle to find a more inspiring group of people, particularly the headteacher and the teaching staff there. They had to deal with cracks appearing in the structure just months before GCSEs and A-levels—an incredibly challenging situation—and did so to the best of their ability. Everyone accepts that the ultimate, best outcome would have been for the students to be able to go back into the school to receive their education on site, but that would not have been safe. People had to work incredibly hard to find an appropriate site that did not involve travel and enabled the students to continue their education safely.

[Joe Morris]

I urge the Minister not just to look at the matters raised in this debate but to consider—as I know she has many times, because I have chased her down corridors about this—the circumstances of those at the community high school. I also put that point to the exam boards, because the students had a black swan event with their school being deemed unsafe so close to exam times. Some of the boards have said that it falls under the definition of a school with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, but I do not believe that—I want to put on the record. For far too long schools in my constituency in the west of Northumberland have been forgotten about and done down. It is beyond time that those responsible, particularly at county hall, stand up and take note.

Dawn Butler (in the Chair): I remind Members that if they want to speak in the debate, they should please stand. We have calculated that Members will have about five minutes per speech.

4.53 pm

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas) for securing the debate.

Investing in education is investing in our future, so we need to get it right. The national funding formula creates huge discrepancies in how children are supported in different authorities. My local authority, South Gloucestershire, has long been at or near the bottom of the funding league table, and that lack of investment is having a real impact on children. Thornbury and Yate is largely rural, but most of the rest of South Gloucestershire is urban. Generally, with all sorts of Government funding, when taken as a whole, it has suffered through not being rural enough for rural support but not having the concentrations of deprivation seen in some urban areas. Even within my constituency there is huge variation in the demographics of school intakes.

I recently wrote to the Minister about the case of one primary school in my constituency that I visited. It provides a good example of the pressures caused by the unfairness in the existing funding system. Staff at the school told me that it has developed a reputation for being particularly supportive of children with SEND, and thus has an unusually high proportion of children who require extra support. On top of that, it is being asked to support increasingly high levels of medical needs, which its already overstretched staff are not trained to meet. It also has a high number of children with English as a second language, and a third of its pupils qualify for pupil premium funding.

In many ways, the school's intake is comparable to a school the staff visited in London, yet that school gets much higher per pupil funding simply because of the local authority it is in. That shows in the services that the London school is able to provide, from having specialist art and music teachers to having two teachers per class. Our children in Thornbury and Yate deserve more than what the funding currently provides.

The disparity is undermining the work that our local schools do and leaving them worse off. We need a fairer national funding formula that supports disadvantaged

and rural schools, not just those in more affluent and urban areas, and recognises the wide variation within local authority boundaries.

Edward Morello: I agree 100% with my hon. Friend's point. I have no doubt that in her constituency, as in mine, there is a similar problem: when the Government talk about a fully funded pay increase, it is based on a school average. In many rural places, we do not have the average because we have smaller class sizes, or we have single, large schools that cover a large geographical area and a large number of pupils, which are heavily disadvantaged as a result.

Claire Young: I absolutely agree. It is a particular problem for small rural schools, which often have small class sizes because the schools are small overall.

We need action on funding for special educational needs and disabilities, as too many children are being left without the support they need. For years, schools in South Gloucestershire have had to ask the Government to allow them to take money from the schools block to supplement the high needs block. That reduces the funding available for early intervention which, as we know, is so important for better outcomes. It also makes the funding situation worse as more children need higher-cost interventions at a later stage. The high needs block must be protected and expanded to reflect the growing demand and rising complexity in children's needs.

South Gloucestershire is one of the authorities with a safety valve agreement, which is intended to help councils to manage large deficits in their high needs budgets. It was signed pre-covid, with targets that are unachievable thanks to the impact of the pandemic. Next year, when the agreement ends, the council faces a cliff edge in funding. It, and other councils in that position, face impossible choices between balancing budgets and supporting vulnerable children.

Furthermore, in the case of South Gloucestershire, the previous Conservative Government failed to provide the requested £30 million of funding to provide an additional 200 special school placements locally. As well as being better for the children, that would have reduced costs. Earlier this year, I had a meeting with the Minister and South Gloucestershire's council leadership in the hope that this Government would take a more sensible approach, but the focus seems to be on providing spaces in mainstream settings. We support that as a goal, with extra funding for early intervention to make it possible, while recognising that there are children who need support now and did not get that early intervention. We also need funding for them.

I ask the Minister to think again about what works now, because otherwise another generation of our children will miss out. Without a solution to the ending of the safety valve agreement, the whole system could collapse, leading to longer waits, reduced provision and more children out of school. We need sustainable, long-term funding for children with high needs, and an end to short-term financial firefighting.

4.58 pm

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate and to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Butler. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Cameron

Thomas) on securing the debate and on his powerful speech. I alert Members to my position as one of the vice chairs of the f40 group, which represents 43 local authorities with historically low funding for education and campaigns for fairer funding for schools and SEND provision.

Somerset is one of those 43 councils. Its 2025-26 dedicated schools grant allocation is just £8,500 per student, while some councils get nearly £5,000 more than that per pupil. The launch in 2018 of the national funding formula for mainstream schools introduced a minimum per pupil funding level, which was designed to level up funding. However, that has continued to lock in historical funding elements, preventing some local authority areas from receiving more funding. The Liberal Democrats understand the need for regional variation to ensure that schools can operate successfully, but that should not come at the expense of schools elsewhere, which often struggle to make ends meet.

As other Members have stated, the DSG is made up of four blocks, one of which is the high needs block, which supports SEND provision for children in both mainstream and specialist schools. Somerset's 2025-2026 allocation of high-needs block funding is £1,250 per student—more than £2,000 less than the highest-funded local authority. It has been stressed many times that the SEND system is broken; the variance and unequal DSG funding is a big reason for that. My inbox, like that of many other Members, is full of correspondence from parents who all desperately want the best education for their children, but are concerned and deeply upset that their children's needs are not being met by their schools.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): My area of Harrogate and Knaresborough is covered by North Yorkshire council, which is part of f40, which my hon. Friend mentioned. On high-needs funding, we are 146th out of 151. That is causing real challenges in that rural setting, with children sometimes having to travel for hours to get to school. Does my hon. Friend share my concerns about those low levels of funding, which are compounded by the cut to the rural services delivery grant that local authorities receive?

Sarah Dyke: I will touch on that. Delivering education in a huge rural county has so many pressures and complexities and my hon. Friend is absolutely right to bring that up.

Let me give a couple of examples of children who are suffering and whose educational needs are not being met in my constituency of Glastonbury and Somerton. One of them is Jensen from Ilchester. He is only seven years old, but has been experiencing severe mental health distress while awaiting a long overdue neurodevelopmental assessment. His mother told me that he has lost all enjoyment in life. He misses his education and his friends, and all the while he is being passed between services. Jensen is not alone in that situation.

Many other children in Glastonbury and Somerton face similar challenges: Charlie from Castle Cary, for example. He has an EHCP, but his school is simply not able to meet his needs. His mother said that he has been left for months without his educational needs, as specified in his EHCP, being met. As a result, his behaviour at

school and his mental health are declining. The differential in DSG funding means that children like Jensen, Charlie and many others heartbreakingly cannot get the support that they deserve. Families are being left to suffer alone, fighting a system that is just not working for them.

We know that the system is broken. The Isos report released last year found that all actors within the system are behaving rationally—schools, councils and parents—but the system is just not up to scratch. The funding model needs to be reformed to make it more responsive to changes so that individual schools can receive funding based on need. I urge the Minister to consider reviewing the funding formulas for both schools and high needs.

The Liberal Democrats have a plan to invest in our education sector above the rate of inflation so that we can ensure that all schools have the capacity to operate sustainably. We must also give our local authorities the financial support that they need. The previous Conservative Government left schools to crumble and forced councils to do more with less, impacting our children's education. The persistent budgetary strain does not allow local authorities to create long-term plans for children with SEND, so we would also set up a dedicated national body for SEND to act as a champion for children with complex needs and ensure that they receive tailored support.

Without major reforms and changes to funding, we will continue to see a landscape with uneven funding where children are badly let down and schools cannot provide the support that is needed. I urge the Minister to take action, invest in education, invest in our children and invest in our future.

5.4 pm

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Butler. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas) on bringing us all together for this important debate to highlight the inequity of the system that built up under the previous Conservative Government and became more and more entrenched over those years. I am only sorry that more Conservative Members did not come to pay attention to this issue today. It is a huge factor in the wellbeing of children in all our constituencies, up and down the country.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) has pointed out, Somerset is one of the f40 local authorities and therefore one of the worst funded local education authorities. A child educated here in Westminster receives £4,000 more funding as a pupil than a child in my Somerset constituency of Taunton and Wellington. At the same time, the demand for SEND in places like Somerset has risen enormously. There has been a 60% increase in placements between 2014-15 and 2023-24 and, as a result, provision in Somerset, as in a lot of other places, is frankly unacceptable. It is not good enough and it needs to change.

Historical special educational needs funding, and the pattern for the national funding formula, is part of the problem. Spending should be based purely on current local need and not on historical need, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies has pointed out in an important report. It says:

“The use of historical spending patterns as a factor in the 2018 high-needs NFF also helped to cement geographical inequalities in high-needs funding that had arisen over time”.

[Gideon Amos]

It goes on:

“The historical spend element determines 25% of the overall formula allocation and drives a large element of the variation in funding across areas. This bakes in...arbitrary differences in council funding that have arisen over time, and lead to large variability in funding per high-needs pupil across councils”.

On the high needs block part of the direct schools grant, it says:

“The present high-needs funding system was introduced in 2018, when numbers were mostly stable, and it incorporates many historical measures of need and spending that already drive substantial geographical differences in spending per pupil. It is ill-designed for the present context of rising need”.

The f40 organisation has said:

“More than 20% of high needs funding is based on a local authority’s historical SEND spending, which bears no resemblance to today’s funding landscape”.

As the Institute for Fiscal Studies has pointed out, the system urgently needs reform.

Part of the problem is the problem of local government funding generally. In Somerset, £2 out of every £3 of council tax goes on care, whether that is adult social care or care for children, including special educational needs funding. It is no wonder that the outgoing Conservative leader of Somerset county council described that as a “time bomb” that “is ticking”. It is unfortunately likely to go off and affect children and families across Somerset, who are suffering the consequences of the legacy that our councillors are now trying to deal with. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) pointed out, the withdrawal of the rural services delivery grant has compounded the problems and challenges for authorities such as Somerset, which have a low property base value across the county compared with property values in other part of the country and have historically low income levels as a result.

The national funding formula therefore has to be improved. The f40 organisation—I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton on her work with f40—has said:

“Government is aware of the unfairness and has indicated that it wishes to level up, but it is a very slow process and, at the current rate, will take around 20 years for equitable funding to be established. That is a whole generation of children. Children should have the same opportunities and resources, regardless of where they live or go to school”.

I am sure Members across the House agree with that and I urge the Minister to make good on that promise to reform the system.

Three things in particular need to be done. First, we need greater support within schools for special educational needs children. That will reduce costs later; we all know early intervention matters for younger children and has the most effect. Secondly, we need more hubs locally providing specialist provision and to not rely on the private, unregistered schools sector for much of our special educational needs provision. That is highly costly and not serving pupils’ best interests because it means transporting them long distances. Thirdly, we need more investment, which comes back to reform of the national funding formula. Liberal Democrats particularly want to see reform of local government funding and social care funding, but also above-inflation increases in school

funding and a dedicated national SEND authority. That is the kind of reform we need to see in this Parliament and I hope very much the Government will deliver it.

5.9 pm

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I refer Members to my entry in the register of interests as a serving Norfolk county councillor. Across all the areas that the DSG exists to support, Norfolk is struggling. Early years settings in North Norfolk are under mounting pressures from the national insurance hike, rising wages and spiralling costs.

For many providers, there is simply not enough money coming in to match what they need to survive. It is estimated that 80% of the income from early years settings now comes from Government-funded childcare. When that funding does not match what is needed, these settings get into deep trouble. In North Norfolk, we cannot afford to lose them. Without childcare for working-age parents in my rural constituency, families who have cherished the area for generations will be forced to move.

The risk of a demographic doom spiral is huge. If schools and nurseries close, working-age people will not be able to both work and have families. If working families cannot survive and thrive in rural North Norfolk, people will not have children. We are already seeing an alarming pattern of those with children not going there. If there are no children, there will be no working-age people of tomorrow. That goes for all children, of all ages, abilities and aptitudes. It is a worrying slippery slope for our area both economically and in supporting vital services such as adult social care.

Good, accessible and affordable childcare is a basis on which we can build our rural economy. That is why, as a candidate, I marched 10 miles in protest at the closure of childcare provision in Wells; we got it reopened thanks to the hard work of parents. It is also why, just last week, I protested the proposed closure of East Ruston nursery with worried local parents who depend on it. Early years provision is an often undervalued but vital part of our education system and I am fighting to protect it in North Norfolk.

Meanwhile, Norfolk’s SEND provision is in crisis. The current system is not helping schools, parents, teachers or the local authority. Demand is rapidly outstripping supply, and Norfolk country council was at the last count running a deficit in the high needs block approaching £60 million. That is completely unsustainable, and we have to change the way our system supports these children and young people to give them a far better experience and to set them up for the rest of their lives.

I recently met a mother and her son at one of my constituency surgeries. He was a very smart, engaging and insightful young man. I shared excellent conversations with him about videogame development and computing, and his talent and potential shone through. However, the system has failed him. He has been out of education for three years, and his mother is battling the tribunal system to try to get him access to formal education again. The toll it has taken on both of them is clear and completely unacceptable, and he is not alone in facing such circumstances.

It pains me to think about a lost generation of talented and passionate young people who could miss out on bright futures because of the crisis in SEND provision. Trust has broken down, and we have to do better. We need to enable and encourage more mainstream inclusion for those for whom that is possible, we need to review the tribunal system, which is putting unnecessary stress on families and often producing unworkable outcomes for local authorities, and we need to better support schools in getting the best out of those pupils by ensuring that criteria for their inspection incentivises high-quality inclusion and looks not just at a pupil's performance on paper, but at their readiness to learn.

Norfolk's families were failed for many years by the disastrous duo: a Conservative Government and a Conservative-led county council. They have got rid of that Government, and I have no doubt they would have gotten rid of the Conservatives on the council, too, if they had not had their election snatched away from them. I am proud to stand side by side with the parents and children who are demanding better for their futures. I will hold the Government and the county council to account to make sure that is delivered.

5.13 pm

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas) for securing the debate and for his powerful speech. The individuals he mentioned, the school staff he represents, and the educators and local authorities across the country grappling with similar financial challenges will surely welcome his putting the spotlight on this pressing issue.

My hon. Friend is quite right that the pressures on all schools and, in turn, on the staff working in them—both the pressures of educating pupils with different and sometimes complex needs and the financial pressure of operating on budgets that simply do not stretch far enough at a time of high and rising costs all over the country—have increased significantly in recent years. I would be surprised if any MP had not had headteachers in their constituency tell them, as they have told me in St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire, of the impossible choices that they face.

At the heart of this crisis lies a fundamental injustice: an outdated and deeply flawed mechanism for allocating the dedicated schools grant. The national funding formula, developed years ago and based mainly on the typical distribution of funding provided by local authorities at that time, and further ossified by funding protections, has created a postcode lottery that fails children and communities.

Let us be clear what that means in practice: similar schools in different parts of the country can receive dramatically different levels of support. That affects a wide range of children, including those who live in pockets of deprivation in parts of the country that are generally wealthier and so tend to receive lower dedicated schools grant funding. Although we know that there are other mechanisms to mitigate that, it ultimately means that a child with specific needs in one area can receive significantly less support than a child from a similar background and with the same needs in another area. That is not just administratively untidy; it is fundamentally wrong. For the organisation f40, which several of my

hon. Friends have mentioned and which represents the lowest-funded education authorities in England—it now counts 43 of them in its membership—that is not a small anomaly but a systemic failure that affects hundreds of thousands of schoolchildren, who are being denied the education that they deserve through absolutely no fault of their own.

We feel that acutely in St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire. Cambridgeshire ranks 133rd out of 151 local authorities in the funding allocation. Our schools receive £6,133 per pupil in the schools block element, compared with the national average of £6,467. If Cambridgeshire schools were funded at a level equivalent to those of our neighbours in Lincolnshire, a typical primary in my constituency would receive an additional £118,000 per year. If the playing field were level with another neighbour, Peterborough, Cambridgeshire would see £33 million in additional funding. Meanwhile, the demand for EHCPs has grown fast: it has risen by 91% in Cambridgeshire since 2017, far outpacing the 72% increase in funding for the high needs block over the same period. The widening gulf means more children waiting longer for vital support, more pressure on already stretched staff and more families reaching breaking point.

The Liberal Democrats believe that equal opportunity in education is not a luxury, but a fundamental right. Every child deserves access to the same resources and opportunities, regardless of their postcode. Although we understand that regional variation has its place—indeed, we championed pupil premium funding to direct resources towards disadvantaged children—it should not have come at the expense of creating the current disparities.

The problem is reaching breaking point. With schools expected to somehow fund teacher pay rises from existing budgets, those with lower DSG allocations face impossible choices: cutting staff, reducing subjects or eliminating those enrichment activities that are vital to a well-rounded education. The Liberal Democrat solution is clear. We would invest in education above the rate of inflation, ensuring that all schools can operate sustainably regardless of geography. We would extend free school meals to all children on universal credit, relieving pressure on family budgets, and place a dedicated mental health professional in every school, recognising that wellbeing and academic achievement are inextricably linked.

Pupil needs have evolved dramatically and our funding system needs to evolve with them. The time for just tinkering at the edges of the formula has passed. We need comprehensive reform that guarantees an equal base level of funding for all pupils, with appropriate additional support reflecting specific school, pupil and area needs. Our children deserve nothing less.

5.20 pm

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Butler. I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I am pleased to respond to this important and thoughtful debate on behalf of the Opposition. I thank the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas) for securing it, and I completely agree with his remarks about the importance of teaching children in the home as well as the school. It is clear from all the contributions we have heard that, across all political divides, we share a desire to see all children, regardless of their location, their

[Rebecca Paul]

background or the complexity of their needs, accessing high-quality education in a setting that supports their potential. That vision depends heavily on fair and sufficient funding for our schools. As we have heard, the dedicated schools grant is at the heart of that.

It would be appropriate, before turning to the concerns raised today, for me to briefly review the last Government's principal achievements in this space, all of which have a bearing on any debate on the dedicated schools grant. Hon. Members will recall that it was a Conservative Government that took the step of reforming school funding through the introduction of the national funding formula, thereby ending the postcode lottery that, for too long, left similar schools receiving vastly different allocations. The national funding formula delivered greater transparency and a demonstrably fairer methodology, and drew a clearer line between the needs of pupils and the funding schools received. However, as the hon. Member for Tewkesbury set out, there are clearly still some disparities. It is right that we look at those and consider what can be done to address them. I look forward to hearing the Minister's view on that.

It was also a Conservative Government that increased core schools funding to record levels. Between 2010 and 2023, funding per pupil rose in real terms, with particular investment in the high needs block of the dedicated schools grant. In fact, by the final year of the previous Government, we had delivered a £10 billion increase in overall schools funding compared with 2019-20, including a £4 billion increase to the high needs budget, bringing total high needs funding to £10.5 billion in 2023-24. We backed that up with targeted support for pupils with SEND through capital investment focused on expanding special school places and improving facilities across the country.

It was the Conservative party that took decisive action to address poor-quality provision, cracking down on unregistered settings and increasing the powers of local authorities and Ofsted to take action where provision fell short. Our approach was unambiguously vindicated, as England soared up the Programme for International Student Assessment league tables between 2009 and 2022 in maths, English and science. In that period, England went from 21st to seventh for maths, from 19th to ninth for reading, and from 11th to ninth for science. Moreover, in December 2023, children in England were named best in the west for reading, and in December 2024 they were ranked the best at maths in the western world in the 2023 TIMSS—trends in international mathematics and science study. Regrettably, where England has surged in international education rankings, Labour-led Wales has slumped. While England went from 21st to seventh in maths, Wales went from 29th to 27th. While England went from 19th to ninth for reading, Wales stayed 28th. While England went from 11th to ninth for science, Wales slumped from 21st to 29th.

Ultimately, whether in England or Wales, there will always be more to do, as the hon. Member for Tewkesbury highlighted, but I can say without hesitation that the legacy left by the last Government on school funding and educational outcomes is overwhelmingly positive, based on a relentless focus on sustained investment and principled reform, and a clear commitment to inclusion. It is not just our record; it is the yardstick by which the current Government must be judged.

Our position today is consistent with that record: we support fair funding, we support the principles behind the dedicated schools grant and we believe in the importance of local flexibility and accountability. We support the overarching aims of the SEND and alternative provision improvement plan, and the continuation of investment to support the transition to new national standards, but we also recognise the real pressures that local authorities and schools are facing. While funding has increased, so too has demand, and the current system is struggling to keep up.

The number of pupils with an education, health and care plan has more than doubled in the last decade. Local authorities up and down the country—Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat alike—are grappling with high needs deficits, a growing wave of legal challenges and spiralling parental frustration. In my constituency, SEND makes up an ever-growing proportion of casework, and I hear every week from parents struggling to secure the provision that their child so desperately needs. It is little wonder that the Public Accounts Committee recently found that the current system risks creating a “lost generation” of children without intervention from central Government.

The National Audit Office was equally blunt in its 2024 report on SEND provision, which made it clear that, without systemic reform, there will be systemic collapse. The crux of the matter is that, as of January 2024, approximately 1.9 million children and young people in England were identified as having special educational needs, with 1.7 million attending school. Despite the 58% real-terms increase over the last decade in high needs funding, which reached £10.7 billion in 2024-25, the system is not delivering improved outcomes for those children and young people.

The financial strain that is placing local authorities under is deeply alarming. The NAO estimates that, by March 2026, 43% of local authorities will have deficits exceeding or close to their reserves, leading to a cumulative deficit between £4.3 billion and £4.9 billion. The situation is exacerbated by the impending end of accounting arrangements that currently prevent those deficits from impacting local authority reserves. Without a clear plan to manage the deficits, many councils risk issuing section 114 notices, effectively declaring bankruptcy.

Demand for education, health and care plans has surged by 140% since 2015: the number of children with one reached 576,000 in 2024. That increase, coupled with long waiting times—only 50% of EHCPs were issued within the statutory 20-week target in 2023—has eroded confidence among families and children in the system's ability to meet statutory and quality expectations. Sadly, at the very moment that clarity and support were most needed, the Education Secretary introduced the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which would do nothing less than destroy standards in English schools.

No less serious are the broken promises on compensation for national insurance contributions, which have left schools in an impossible funding situation. It is reported that some schools face funding gaps of up to 35% for those additional NIC costs. That shortfall will only exacerbate existing financial pressures, forcing schools to divert funds from essential services, potentially leading to the loss of valued staff, reduced capacity to accommodate pupils with special needs and a generally lower standard of education provision.

In summary, we are at a point where the Government are asking councils to maintain high-quality provision even as they manage large accumulated deficits, some exceeding £100 million, without knowing how or when those will be resolved. Schools have been asked to go further and faster on inclusion without the confidence that adequate support services will be in place to back them up. At the same time, parents are being asked to trust a system that all too often feels both overwhelming and overwhelmed.

I want to put a number of questions to the Minister that reflect the concerns raised by Members, local authorities and professionals across the education sector. First, the Government have confirmed that they will continue funding local authorities through the dedicated schools grant for the foreseeable future, but what is the long-term plan for managing the high needs deficits that many councils have accrued? The safety valve programme and the delivering better value programme provide some support, but they are not available to every authority and they do not provide a long-term solution. Will the Minister confirm whether the dedicated schools grant will remain ringfenced beyond 2025? Will she guarantee that local authorities will not be forced to divert core council budgets to prop up SEND provision at the expense of other vital services?

Secondly, on transparency and accountability, colleagues have spoken of the challenges that their local schools face in not just securing adequate funding but navigating a system that is complex, fragmented and adversarial. Parents are turning to tribunals in record numbers, while local authorities are caught between an ever-growing web of statutory duties and finite budgets with which to deliver them. What steps are the Government taking to reduce the number of SEND tribunals, and what support will be offered to schools to manage rising demand?

Finally, I want to address the issue of place planning and capacity. One of the most frequent complaints we hear from local authorities is about the mismatch between need and availability, particularly in relation to specialist settings. This is not just about funding; it is about the ability to plan, build and adapt provision to changing demographics and trends. Will the Minister set out what work is being done to support local authorities in expanding specialist provision where it is most needed? How will the Department ensure that capital investment keeps pace with rising demand? What role does she see for the dedicated schools grant in ensuring that sufficient places are available for all?

I will end my long list of questions by thanking the hon. Member for Tewkesbury for securing today's debate. The dedicated schools grant is a critical part of how we deliver education in this country, but if it is to work as intended, particularly in relation to SEND, it must be fair, transparent and sustainable. I look forward to hearing from the Minister how the Government will make it so.

5.30 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell):

It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Ms Butler. I congratulate the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas) on securing this debate on the dedicated schools grant, and on the important speech that he gave on such an important subject. Getting this right is a key part of

achieving the Labour Government's aim of breaking down the barriers to opportunity for every child and making sure that the link between background and success is truly broken. That is why we are putting education back at the centre of national life again, and why we have prioritised education funding by increasing the overall core schools budget by £3.2 billion in 2025-26, taking the overall core schools budget to £64.8 billion this year.

Like many Members, I regularly visit schools in my constituency. I know that individual schools face different challenges when it comes to their budgets. The unfunded spending commitments that this Government inherited mean that we have to take tough decisions to restore the public finances, but I am proud that against that backdrop we are putting the money where our mouth is and committing more funding to enable every child to achieve and thrive. The Department for Education will continue to support teachers and school leaders to deliver on that as much as we can. We are ensuring that schools are supported to ensure that they spend their money as efficiently as they can while delivering the best possible life chances to as many children as they can. That means supporting them with best practice for budgeting and financial planning, support and mentoring for school business professionals, and giving hands-on support through school resource management advisers who provide independent and tailored advice to schools on how they can best maximise every pound that they spend. More widely, the national funding formula distributes funding for mainstream schools, as we have discussed already, via the dedicated schools grant. It is based on pupils' needs and characteristics, so that we can direct the funding to where it is needed.

In 2025-26, £5.1 billion of the school national funding formula has been allocated through deprivation factors, with £8.6 billion allocated for additional needs overall. That is 17.8% of total core funding through the formula, so £1 in every £5 goes on those factors, which helps schools in their vital work to close attainment gaps. I have listened very carefully to the debate, but I must reiterate that the purpose of the national funding formula—I think hon. Members appreciate this—is not to give every pupil the same level of funding per pupil. It is right that pupils who need additional investment attract the additional funding that helps schools respond to and meet their needs. That means that schools in more expensive areas, such as London, attract higher funding per pupil to reflect the higher costs of being at school in London, because of the higher costs that are faced.

However, I recognise that schools have historically struggled with chaos and short-termism in school funding. When we came into government, because of the timing of the general election, in 2025-26 we wanted to give schools certainty about their funding and to minimise disruption for them. Consequently, we prioritised keeping the same funding formula, so that schools had certainty about it, and we also prioritised the speed of allocating that funding over making any changes to the national funding formula that might have been made—but I can confirm that for 2026-27 we are reviewing the national funding formula. I have listened very carefully to what has been said today, because we recognise the importance of establishing a fair funding system that directs funding to where it is most needed.

Richard Foord: After the Government conduct that review of the national funding formula in 2026-27, will the Minister set out what additional funding she expects to have to put into the formula that urban councils such as Westminster might attract to cover their costs?

Catherine McKinnell: I think the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I cannot get into the detail of a particular local authority area, or indeed a particular aspect of the funding. He will also appreciate that the national funding formula is fairly complex and obviously any changes to it will be very carefully considered, so that we make sure that it is allocated fairly. Nevertheless, I appreciate the issues that various hon. Members have raised today about the different challenges faced by different parts of the country, different demographics and different geographies. Obviously, all those factors will need to be taken into consideration.

Members have also touched on the issue of pay. In its written evidence to the review body, the Department proposed a 2025 pay award for teachers of 2.8%. We were clear that schools will be expected to fund that award from the overall funds they will receive next year, including the additional £2.3 billion provided in the autumn Budget. The schools' costs technical note, which was published in March, forecast a £400 million headroom in school budgets nationally in this financial year before staff pay awards. As I said at the beginning, I recognise that individual schools will have to balance funding and costs differently, which will matter in how any staff pay award might affect their budget. We will continue to support schools as they navigate these decisions, which are in line with the asks of the rest of the public sector, too.

Tom Gordon: I recently met a number of schools in my constituency; part of the problem that they have in balancing the books is the ongoing lack of reasonable amounts of maintenance funding. Last year I met the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), who is the Minister with responsibility for early years, to discuss this issue. Will that funding also be considered when we talk about funding allocation, because in places such as Harrogate, where we have schools that are hundreds of years old, the cost of maintaining those schools far outstrips the cost of maintaining new builds in urban areas?

Catherine McKinnell: I appreciate the challenge that the hon. Gentleman faces. I also appreciate that some of these capital challenges, which are obviously revenue challenges as well for some schools, are a big challenge. We have seen chronic under-investment in our school estate over many years. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) and his constituents have sadly experienced that a school built only eight years ago also appears to be crumbling now. We have a significant backlog of repairs and maintenance, and support that has to be given to schools to get them up to a standard whereby they can deliver the education that we know children deserve. Obviously, we will continue to look at these issues as we navigate a difficult financial situation. We are acutely aware of the challenges that many schools face in maintaining their estate.

Fundamentally, each of our decisions is based on the determination to build a firm foundation upon which to rebuild our public services; some of that is about what we deliver and some of it is about the infrastructure.

That is because we are determined that all children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities also receive the right support, so that they can succeed in their education and as they move into adult life. High needs funding will increase by £1 billion in 2025-26, which will bring the total to over £12 billion. Of that total, Gloucestershire county council is being allocated over £105 million through the high needs funding block of the dedicated schools grant, calculated using the high needs national funding formula, which is an increase of over £8 million. The high needs allocation is an 8.3% increase per head in the two to 18-year-old population compared with 2024-25. That funding is to support the ongoing costs of special educational needs and disability provision.

To be clear, we do not expect local authorities to use that increase in high needs funding to pay down historical deficits. The structure of the high needs funding formula is largely unchanged. As I said, we need to take time to consider what changes might be necessary in future years to ensure that the system is fair and directs funding to where it is needed, and supports any reforms that we want to bring forward in relation to special educational needs and disabilities.

The Government recognise the strain that the rising cost of special educational needs and disabilities provision is putting on local government, and particularly the impact on councils' finances. The statutory override is a temporary accounting measure that separates out local authorities' dedicated schools grant deficits from their wider financial position to help them manage their deficits, and we are working with the sector to find a way forward. We will set out plans for reforming the SEND system in more detail later this year, which will include supporting local authorities to deal with historical and accruing deficits as part of any period of transition from the current SEND system to any new system. That will also inform any decision to remove the statutory override.

Tom Gordon: I thank the Minister for being generous with her time. I want to press her on her point about working with local authorities. Given that some councils now under Reform control seem to be getting their instructions by diktat from their leader, the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), is she disappointed, like I am, that no Member of the Reform party is present for this important debate?

Catherine McKinnell: The hon. Gentleman makes his point well.

As a Government, we are determined that local authorities will be able to deliver those high-quality services for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, but in a financially sustainable way. Those two elements go hand in hand to create a stronger and more prosperous future for children and families. Many hon. Members have spoken about their constituents' experiences, and we recognise that too many families and children are not experiencing the quality of SEND services and provision that they should expect, and that the rising cost of SEND provision is putting a significant strain on both local authority and school finances.

Sarah Dyke: The Minister describes the additional funding but, as I have explained, many parents and children are suffering with severe mental health issues;

it is heartbreaking to see. The Liberal Democrats want to provide a dedicated mental health professional in every school, so that every child and parent has somebody to turn to when they need it. What steps are the Government putting in place to support parents and children who are facing mental health challenges?

Catherine McKinnell: The hon. Lady identifies an important issue. Yes, we have a big challenge in relation to special educational needs and disabilities, but we also face much wider challenges relating to young people's mental health right across our school system. The Government are committed to ensuring that we have mental health professionals in every school and community so that children and families can get that support, whether it be within a school setting or outside if that is where they want to access it.

Hon. Members will appreciate that the spending review is ongoing. It is due to conclude in June, but our objective is to ensure that local authorities, schools and colleges can deliver high-quality services for children and young people with SEND. We will set out in more detail how local authorities will deal with their historical deficits as part of that consideration.

I again thank the hon. Member for Tewkesbury for bringing this matter forward, and all those who contributed to what has been a very thoughtful debate. I think there is a large amount of consensus on what we want to achieve for children and young people: getting the best outcomes from our dedicated schools grant. The Government have made clear our commitment to addressing the challenges as part of supporting children and young people to achieve and thrive. I am determined that progress will be made.

I want to give my final word of thanks to all those who work in our school system in the interests of our children and young people, in Gloucestershire and across the country. Indeed, I realise I meant to come back to my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham to particularly commend the staff at Prudhoe community high school, who have been working incredibly hard to minimise the impact on the children and young people who are taking their GCSEs, A-levels, BTECs, T-levels and all the assessments going on this summer. We know that school leaders and teachers are working tirelessly, regardless of any debate we have in this place about school funding or otherwise, to deliver the best outcomes for the children in their area. They should know that they have a Government who are on their side, who will support them to deliver that, despite the very challenging economic

circumstances that we have inherited. We need to deliver the very best for all our children and young people. We have pledged to review the funding system to help to support and achieve that.

5.46 pm

Cameron Thomas: I thank all hon. Members for their speeches. My hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) equated the differential in funding to an entire teacher's salary. The hon. Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) contextualised the crisis faced by constituents with inadequate transport infrastructure and unfit buildings. I join him in thanking our teaching staff for their inspiring work ethic. My hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) explained how her diverse constituency suffers from not being rural enough and not being urban enough. Her young people do deserve more.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) highlighted the legacy inequity locked into the current system. My hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) called for the national funding formula to reflect current need, not historical need. My hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) broadened the picture by explaining that families are having fewer children because they struggle to support even themselves.

I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, my hon. Friend the Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom), who spoke of the postcode lottery perpetuated by a systemically flawed funding formula. I thank the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul), who joined our call to review the national funding formula, even if her recollection of her party's record differs from that of the rest of the country, not least my teachers.

I thank the Minister, who described her ambition to put education at the heart of the Government's national rebuild. I am pleased that the Government will commit to reviewing the national funding formula. I am sure she will not mind if my colleagues and I chalk that one up to this debate. Once more, Ms Butler, I thank you for the honour of bringing this debate under your chairship.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Dedicated Schools Grant.

5.48 pm

Sitting suspended.

Cullompton and Wellington Stations

6 pm

Dawn Butler (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that they may only make a speech with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and the Minister. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

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

That this House has considered the potential merits of reopening Cullompton and Wellington railway stations.

It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Butler. The Minister may have heard some of these arguments before, but there have been developments in recent months that he should hear before any decisions are made in relation to Cullompton and Wellington stations.

The south-west has suffered from chronic under-investment in transport infrastructure—a legacy of the Beeching cuts in the 1960s, when communities were cut off as many stations across the country, including Cullompton and Wellington, lost their rail services. The campaign to bring back those stations commenced almost as soon as they were lost. In 1996, Devon county council commissioned a preliminary design for a new station at Cullompton, and by 2013 the metro board had been established, bringing together MPs, local councils, the rail industry and enterprise partnerships.

Since then the metro board has met more than 30 times, co-chaired in recent months by my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) and me. The studies have culminated in the submission of a final business case to the Department for Transport in May 2024. Later that summer, my colleague and I received letters from the Chancellor pulling the plug on Restoring Your Railway funding. That was a gut punch for communities across the country with less well-established programmes, but I am pleased to say that Restoring Your Railway had already done a lot of the hard work relating to Cullompton and Wellington stations.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Somerton and Langport is the largest area without a station between London and Penzance; it represents a 28-mile gap between Taunton and Castle Cary. I have worked hard with constituents in the area, who indeed put together a robust business plan and applied for the Restoring Your Railway fund, only to find that all their work had been turned down, scuppering their plans to build a station in the area. Does my hon. Friend agree that that decision denies my constituents the economic and social opportunities that the connectivity of a station would provide, which would enable them to bring business and new homes into the area?

Richard Foord: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning economic and social opportunities. I too have been contacted by constituents about how they think a station in their town would provide those. Neil Perry, a resident of Cullompton who commutes daily to Exeter for his job as a teacher, told me that he spends nearly 10 full days each year stuck in Cullompton traffic—time lost to him simply because there is no

local rail option. He leaves the house at 7.30 am to beat the worst of the congestion, and must leave work at 2.30 pm to avoid a 25-minute journey turning into an hour-long ordeal. The train from Tiverton Parkway to Exeter takes just 11 minutes, and we could see a journey of a similar time from Cullompton. Neil estimates he would save over £2,000 a year in parking, fuel, and car maintenance and points out that Cullompton would become an up-and-coming and much more prosperous town, which would help to drive growth.

This Labour Government are very keen on economic growth, particularly the role that development and housing infrastructure plays in it. They have set an ambitious target to build 1.5 million homes by 2029, and its success hinges on delivering the necessary infrastructure to support those homes. I hear time and again from the people I represent in Devon that they do not want to, and cannot, see the homes built in advance of infrastructure that just does not arrive.

Nowhere is that more evident than in the Culm Garden Village project. Located just east of junction 28 of the M5, the proposed development would bring over 5,000 new homes to Cullompton. Without a railway station, those new residents would be reliant on the motorway. That motorway is already under severe pressure; junction 28 sees queues on to the inside lane, making it already a very unsafe motorway approach road to use. Residents welcomed the recent news of funding for the Cullompton town centre relief road. It is a step forward but, on its own, that relief road will not be enough. We have already seen the consequences of building homes without the right infrastructure: gridlocked roads, overstretched public services and growing frustration among residents. We cannot see that mistake made again in Cullompton.

Another of the people I represent from Cullompton, Tim Pethick, has worked in mental health services at Torbay hospital for 20 years. He was recently diagnosed as unfit to drive due to epilepsy, and now faces a 34-mile journey to work using public transport. Cullompton has no direct rail link. He has looked into using a bus pass, but that is not possible because bus passes cannot be used before 9.30 in the morning and the bus journey takes more than two hours. Here is somebody who has worked solidly for the NHS for the last couple of decades and whose career might be over if he cannot get good public access through the train. Those are just two examples, but my concern is that they are just two of many people who feel isolated and forced out of the workforce because of the lack of rail infrastructure in Cullompton.

Thinking more broadly, the south-west as a whole is a region where social mobility is a challenge. The South-West Social Mobility Commission's 2024 report confirms that our region is one of the worst performing in England for disadvantaged young people. By age 19, 34% of disadvantaged young people in our region have achieved a level 3 qualification, compared with 42% nationally. We can see that the south-west has quite a high proportion of disadvantaged students, but a low proportion of disadvantaged students who progress to higher education. The University of Exeter commissioned a 2019 report called "Social Mobility in the South West", which revealed that only 17% of disadvantaged pupils in the region went on to university—the lowest rate among all regions in England.

A major contributor to that poor performance is transport infrastructure. Young people in rural towns and villages—places such as Cullompton and Wellington—often struggle to access college, sixth form and any sort of further or higher education. For young people without access to a car, getting to college or university is not just difficult; it is impossible.

The reopening of Cullompton station would be transformative, as would the reopening of Wellington station in Somerset. It would open up opportunities to get to Exeter college, the University of Exeter and FE establishments further afield, and would be fantastic for generating new apprenticeship opportunities. As the Labour Government have said, if we want to get Britain working, apprenticeships will be an aspect to that.

Just two weeks ago, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington and I met the Rail Minister, Lord Hendy, and 30 local residents who had travelled to London to lobby him. Together, we made the case directly that reopening the railway stations would not just be a transport upgrade; it would be life-changing for our communities.

A single journey by rail produces up to 75% fewer carbon emissions per passenger than the same journey by car. We know that transportation as a whole accounts for 27% of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions, so the railway stations would support and bolster the Labour Government's climate change mitigation aims. The reopening of Wellington and Cullompton stations is not just some idea that will benefit a few people in the south-west of England; it is very much thought through, supported on a cross-party basis, economically sound and environmentally responsible, and it could be socially transformative.

6.10 pm

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Butler. I am grateful both to my hon. Friend the Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord), for securing this debate, and to the Minister; I really must be more punctual in asking a Minister's permission to speak in future, and I am very grateful for his permission to take part in this debate.

A couple of weeks ago, a delegation of 30 to 40 local residents travelled the three or four hours from Somerset and Devon to Parliament to present a couple of letters to the Rail Minister, Lord Hendy, in Westminster Hall, one from Wellington town council and one signed by MPs throughout the Cardiff-Bristol-Exeter corridor. It is important to remember that the station's reopening project, which combines two reopenings in one, will benefit the whole region, and my hon. Friend and I place on record our gratitude to the hon. Members for Exeter (Steve Race), for North Somerset (Sadik Al-Hassan) and for Weston-super-Mare (Dan Aldridge), who have all signed the letter with us and are fully supportive of the project.

For example, the project will enable thousands of young people who have no access to public transport, in west Somerset and elsewhere, to travel to colleges in Bristol, Cardiff and Exeter. It will also enable thousands of customers to reach businesses.

Sarah Dyke: I intervene because Jonathan, a constituent from Somerton, hoped that his son would attend Richard Huish sixth form in Taunton, in my hon. Friend's

constituency. However, the nearest train station is 12 miles away, and there are unreliable bus services right across Glastonbury and Somerton, so it proved impossible for Jonathan's son to attend the sixth form of his choosing. Does my hon. Friend agree that the lack of rail connectivity creates barriers to education?

Gideon Amos: My hon. Friend highlights a practical example of how so many young people in Somerset, a place where sixth form colleges are literally few and far between, have difficulty accessing education because of the lack of public transport. This station project would enable thousands of people to reach Exeter college and the excellent Richard Huish college in my constituency, which is well known to be one of the best in the country.

As I was saying, the station's reopening will allow young people to reach jobs along the Bristol, Exeter and Cardiff corridor and customers to reach businesses. It is no wonder that a key strength of the case for the project is its benefit-cost ratio of 3.67. For the cost of around £42 million, £180 million of economic growth would go into the region, which I know the Government would want to see. Frankly, there is no other rail project in the south-west that is ready to go and could be built and completed in the next two years, as the project is so far advanced. In fact, had it not been for the review in July last year, the spades would be in the ground and the platforms under construction, because the contract was about to be let and the detailed design was almost finished.

Our letter makes other equally telling points about the benefits of this station. Wellington is a growing town, which has had around 2,000 new homes in the last few years and has a projected 41% increase in housing numbers. That will mean about 6,000 more residents, and without the railway station, that is unlikely to be possible.

Finally, we asked the Department for Transport to tell us what the recent benefit-cost ratios were—the figure for our project is 3.67. The answer we received was that the Department does not routinely share or publish benefit-cost ratios. We were asking not for routine publication, but specifically for the benefit-cost ratio information. I hope that the Minister will look at releasing that information.

6.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Butler. First, I reassure the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) that the potential merits of the Cullompton and Wellington rail stations are still firmly under consideration. The Chancellor announced the closure of the restoring your railway programme in her statement to the House last July. Despite the closure of the programme, the Department for Transport continues to consider the project as part of its spending review.

The stations project has already received £6.15 million to complete the full business case and most of the design work. It is estimated that an investment of about £45 million of additional funding is needed to complete delivery of the stations. However, due to the difficult financial situation inherited from the previous Government, it will not be possible for all transport projects to continue, particularly those not yet in delivery, where spades are not in the ground.

[Simon Lightwood]

Clearly, the Cullompton and Wellington project is not solely about the restoration of historical infrastructure, but about the important benefits that the stations can bring to their local communities and the broader region in future. The two towns share several characteristics and challenges. Cullompton and Wellington are both characterised by low-density residential neighbourhoods surrounding modest town centres, yet despite their rural charm, there is evidence of serious local challenges that affect the towns' ability to fulfil their economic, social and environmental capacity.

In 2019, for example, indices of multiple deprivation showed that five areas of Cullompton were considerably deprived compared with national averages, reflecting issues such as educational attainment and skills gaps, income deprivation affecting children and young people, barriers to housing and adverse living environments. Despite these challenges, however, Cullompton is projected to have substantial material growth. With development plans in place, the town's population is projected to nearly double from 8,807 in 2021 to 17,994 by 2033. Further growth, including the second phase of the garden village, could increase the population to approximately 25,000 by 2040.

In short, Cullompton is already nearly three times the size it was when its railway station was closed in the 1960s. It is likely to grow to more than seven times the size it was over the couple of decades to follow. That expansion underscores the urgent need for enhanced public transport to support the growing community. A new railway station in Cullompton would naturally meet that need.

Similarly, Wellington's population is set to increase significantly due to ongoing and planned developments, including 2,580 additional dwellings. But Wellington is still heavily car-dependent at present, with many residents commuting regionally for employment, education and leisure. The reliance on private vehicles worsens social inequality, particularly for those without access to a car. The result is high levels of deprivation and inequality among parts of the community, with parts of the town having among the highest levels of deprivation in Somerset and falling within the most deprived 20% of wards in

England. In turn, those impacts are likely to worsen further with the predicted population increases in Wellington over the coming years.

Car dependency, especially with Wellington's links to Taunton, the nearest employment hub, has also created environmental challenges due to the impact of commuting on the road network. For example, air quality management areas that cover parts of Taunton and eastern approaches to Exeter have been designated. Somerset and Devon county councils made climate declarations in 2019 and 2020 respectively, featuring reduced transport emissions as a key pillar, and a need to improve air quality in urban areas.

Reopening Wellington station presents the potential for a significant mode shift from car to rail, particularly for journeys between Wellington and Taunton, Exeter, Bristol and Bridgwater. In addition, improved rail connectivity would reduce travel times and enhance journey reliability, while also promoting sustainable transport options.

The strategic objectives for building both stations are clear. As well as benefiting the immediate areas in Cullompton and Wellington, enhancing public transport connectivity will also support economic growth and productivity in Exeter, Taunton and Bridgwater, reducing road congestion, car dependency and associated carbon emissions. The stations would contribute to sustainable development, connecting new residential areas with regional employment, education and healthcare opportunities. With the provision of station calls at both towns, the case for taking a combined approach presents significantly higher value for money, compared with a stand-alone project in either area.

In conclusion, the Department recognises that the reopening of Cullompton and Wellington rail stations would be a strategic investment in the future of those communities. Enhanced public transport connectivity also aligns with the Government's goals to drive economic growth, reduce environmental impact and improve social mobility, creating a more equitable and prosperous region.

Question put and agreed to.

6.21 pm

Sitting suspended.

Poverty: Glasgow North East

6.30 pm

Maureen Burke (Glasgow North East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered poverty in Glasgow North East constituency.

It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Butler. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this most serious of subjects. I rise to speak not only as a Member of Parliament for Glasgow North East, but as someone who knows what poverty looks like up close. I grew up in Easterhouse, one of the most deprived areas of Glasgow. I left school at the age of 15 when both my parents were diagnosed with tuberculosis. I joined my siblings to help provide for our family, doing what we had to do to survive, like so many in our communities still do today. It is that experience that drives me now, recognising that behind every stat about poverty, there are people—families, children and friends—facing impossible choices. Fighting for them is the sole reason I am an MP.

The idea for this debate was born a number of months ago, when I discovered data from Health Equals, which revealed that my constituency of Glasgow North East has the lowest life expectancy of any UK parliamentary constituency. The truth is that although those figures are shocking, they are sadly not surprising. In Glasgow North East, wages are lower, and the percentage of people with a disability is higher, than the Scottish and UK averages. Deaths from preventable health conditions such as coronary heart disease are higher than compared with Scotland as a whole. Tragically, nearly 38% of children in my constituency live in poverty.

As Health Equals tells us, deep inequality between the poorest and the richest cuts lives short. In the UK, one of the richest countries in the world, people are dying because they are poor. When we think about poverty, we need to think of it in context. Glasgow North East having the UK's lowest life expectancy does not happen by accident, and can be changed only through progressive Government action. For too many years, people in my constituency have operated under a system that has allowed inequality to fester. Opportunities and wealth have been unevenly distributed, and public services have failed people time and again.

The last Labour Government made the eradication of poverty a national mission. Families the length and breadth of the UK felt the benefit of that determination, but after a decade of Tory austerity and nearly two decades of SNP neglect in Scotland, that progress has been reversed and the living conditions of far too many are reminiscent of days we thought had been consigned to history. The Britain that this Labour Government inherited was broken. It was a Britain whose leadership had tolerated the intolerable as more people slid into destitution. That cannot be fixed overnight, but it cannot be allowed to continue either.

The Trussell Trust tells us that 3.1 million food parcels were handed out across the UK between 2023 and 2024—262,000 in Scotland and 5,846 in Glasgow North East. Sadly, tonight 10,000 children in Scotland will go to sleep in temporary accommodation—a number that has risen every single year in the past decade, bar a slight decrease during the pandemic—and one in

six Scots will continue their agonising wait for NHS treatment. This is a wealthy country, but its people are poor.

The real lived experiences of people should always be at the centre of debates such as this one, because I believe that they make the most powerful case for change. In the Stobhill area of my constituency, there is a Marie Curie hospice. I am in absolute awe of the work done by Marie Curie to treat people in the final stages of their life with compassion and dignity. However, the staff working at the hospice will openly say that far too many of the people who come through their doors should have more time to live. That is not a hopeful attempt to comfort grieving families, although I am sure it does that too. Rather, it is a reflection of the direct effects that poverty has on people's living standards.

Funded by UK Research and Innovation, Marie Curie and the University of Glasgow conducted a research project that was titled, "Dying in the Margins". This research showed that one in four working-age people with a terminal illness in Scotland dies in poverty. That challenges the idea that terminal illness is an equaliser of social classes, recognising instead that it actually worsens inequality.

In addition, there is a 24-year gap in healthy life expectancy between the most deprived communities and the least deprived communities. When faced with a diagnosis of a terminal illness, poorer people are forced into making difficult choices or find themselves suffering hardship because of the associated costs. It is, as one participant in the research noted, a "double burden".

Let us take, for example, Max. He is a 65-year-old gentleman who really wanted to spend his last days in his community and—importantly—with his dog, Lily. On one occasion, despite being in serious pain, Max even fled the hospice to be reunited with Lily, but his home was unsuitable for someone in his condition. He lived in a fourth-floor flat and could not climb into his bath. Sadly, the housing association failed to carry out adaptations to his home and so, in the final days of his life, Max was forced back into the hospice. He died, with his wish of dying in the comfort of his own home and with his beloved companion Lily by his side unrealised. We cannot change Max's experience, but we can take action to ensure that we treat people who are in similar situations with greater respect and dignity.

Poverty can strike at any point, suddenly disrupting lives. That is what happened to my constituent Martin. He was a working homeowner who, because of a relationship breakdown, found himself homeless with three children, one of whom has additional support needs. Martin had to leave his job to care for his children during this traumatic period. Glasgow city council placed the family in a hotel, where Martin and his three children had to pack up and move rooms each night. Although Martin tried to keep his children in a routine and in school during this time, their school attendance suffered and their situation has obviously affected their education.

Martin remains in temporary accommodation that is unsuitable for his family. He has been trying to find permanent accommodation since November, but the social housing stock is just not available. Martin wants to work and provide for his family, but he is not receiving the housing support he needs to get him to that point. In short, poverty has put his family's lives on hold. That is why, when I think of poverty, I think of it as theft. It

[Maureen Burke]

steals potential and robs opportunity. It denies the world of the brilliance, warmth and talent of so many who may never be seen or heard.

Our duty, surely, is to do all we can to make better the lives of people we may never know or ever meet. I am encouraged by the work already being undertaken by the Government to do just that. The Government are legislating to ensure that work can be a genuine route out of poverty, as well as the realisation of a stable and enjoyable life. Our Employment Rights Bill delivers fairer working conditions, stronger rights and improved pay for millions. These are the steps that show our values: that work should offer dignity and security, not trap people in in-work poverty.

More recently, the “Pathways to Work” paper outlines additional steps through reforms to the welfare system. I welcome, for example, the scrapping of the work capability assessment, which many charities described as dehumanising and distressing. I also welcome the commitment to reduce assessments for people with longer term health conditions.

It would be remiss of me, however, not to acknowledge concerns about other aspects of the proposals, and I hope to hear answers from the Minister today. Can the Government ensure that people receiving end-of-life care will not lose access to their benefits as a result of the plans? Can the Minister set out how new employment support programmes will be delivered in a way that is supportive and empowering, rather than patronising and disparaging? Can the Minister confirm that the Government recognise that for some people work simply is not possible, and that they should continue to receive financial support and assistance?

I ask those questions because I recognise that our welfare system is failing people. I support the efforts to fix it, but reform cannot mean regression. Let us also remember that so much of the responsibility for welfare provision lies with the Scottish Government. They hold powers, so they must bear responsibility. My constituents are waiting too long for support, with the majority of adult disability payment applications taking four months to process. In 2023, shockingly, 116 people died while waiting for the outcome of their application. I will hold the UK Government to account, but I expect the Scottish Government to do more than posture on this issue, which I am afraid has been the extent of their contribution so far.

When my time as an MP ends, I want to be judged on the following questions. Did I make life better for the people in my community who had the least? Was I part of a Government who worked tirelessly to root out the causes of poverty and low life expectancy? Are people living better lives now than they were under the previous Government? We can be the Parliament that ends the era of excuses, and we can be the country that declares poverty not inevitable but unacceptable.

Dawn Butler (in the Chair): I would like to get to the Front Benchers by 7.08 pm, so everybody has about three and a half to four minutes.

6.43 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Maureen Burke) on bringing forward this debate. I particularly

liked her driving force, which is: did I make life in my community better? That should be the driving force of all MPs and I commend her for taking that stance.

I want to say a couple of things about the social security safety net, and what is being provided to protect people from the worst of poverty to ensure that life expectancies are equalised. Those of us who are lucky enough to live in a level of privilege have the luxury of being able to make mistakes and cope with a few rough barriers in our way. We can cope with our washing machine breaking down and our child needing a new pair of shoes in the same month, whereas people who are living on the breadline do not have that level of privilege and luxury. If two of those things happen at once, through no fault of their own, then getting through that and working out whether to buy a washing machine or a pair of shoes for the child—when someone is struggling to make ends meet as it is—is the most difficult choice. If we can get to a position where people have the luxury of being able to make some choices, and are able to ensure that their children can thrive and not just survive, then we have done a good thing and made life better for our communities.

There are issues with the social security safety net. The essentials guarantee has been put forward by the Trussell Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation among others. In order to pay for an essential basket of goods, someone needs about £120 a week. That includes the most basic food, ensuring an internet connection, heating and rent—it covers those basic things. The universal credit standard allowance is only £92.

Most people agree that the essential basket is a reasonable level for the social security safety net to be at. It would be sensible to look at where we are with the universal credit standard allowance, and whether it does meet basic needs. That is before we talk about things such as the child poverty strategy, and the possibility of cancelling the two-child cap, which people are asking for across the board, as well as scrapping the total benefits cap.

In Scotland we are doing what we can to mitigate some of that. We have managed to ensure that child poverty in Scotland is reducing rather than increasing, but it is much more stagnant than we would like it to be because we are having to mitigate some of these cuts. I echo the views of the hon. Member for Glasgow North East on disability payments; 55% of children in Scotland who live in poverty have a disabled family member. We do not know how the cuts to eligibility in the personal independence payment are going to interact with the Scottish benefits system.

Will people have to do assessments for both adult disability payment and PIP in order to ensure their eligibility for the UC health element, or will the UK Government work out the UC health element on the basis of the ADP assessment? I am not clear on how that will work, or on how the welfare Bill that is hopefully coming in the near future will make it clear. For my constituents, and for those people in Glasgow North East, how those things will interact and what difference it will make to their lives is really key. It would be helpful if the Minister could give us clarity as soon as possible on the interaction between the welfare Bill and the Scottish Government systems on, for example, adult disability payment.

I again commend the hon. Member for Glasgow North East on raising this really important issue.

I understand why it is the most important issue in her constituency, and more power to her elbow for making life better for her constituents.

6.48 pm

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Maureen Burke), who is my neighbour, for securing this important debate. Glasgow has disgraceful levels of absolute poverty, with families who cannot afford the essentials to live: food, heat, school uniforms and clothes.

We do not help those in desperate poverty by making unaffordable promises. But despite the constrained public finances, our Government have taken action. Our last Budget raised billions in extra taxes to fight poverty. In Scotland, that means an extra £4.9 billion for the Scottish Government, so that they can tackle record NHS waiting lists and arrest the alarming decline of Scottish education. Our Employment Rights Bill tackles the evil of in-work poverty, with the biggest upgrade to workers' rights in a generation. Our Government have increased the living wage well above inflation.

Our Government have been in power for 10 months; the Tories were in power for 10 years and the SNP have been in power for 18 years—at the helm of an incredibly powerful devolved Administration blessed with significant powers. The SNP have run Glasgow city council for eight years.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that many of the essential services that families rely on are delivered by local authorities, and that local authorities have had their budgets slashed year on year by the Scottish Government, which impacts their ability to protect and support the most vulnerable people in our societies?

John Grady: I agree. Local government has been emasculated by the Tory Governments in England and Wales and the SNP Government in Scotland. I must say that they are pretty non-discriminatory in their emasculation, because they have failed to properly fund the SNP council in Glasgow for years.

In Scotland, one cause of poverty is the shocking state of the NHS. Record waiting lists do not just delay people getting back to work; the delays mean that their conditions deteriorate to a point where they cannot return to work, and we should be incredibly angry about that. In 2007, the Scottish Government promised to establish a ministerial taskforce on health inequalities, yet Scotland continues to have the worst health inequalities in western and central Europe. On disability health checks, following a successful pilot in 2019-20, the Scottish Government committed to carry out annual health checks for people with learning disabilities in 2022. It was to be completed by 2023, but as of 2023-24, only 6.9% of eligible people had been offered a health check. The SNP's record in Holyrood on health is absolutely shameful.

Education is an essential pathway out of poverty. However, the attainment gap in Scotland is widening, which means that kids in my constituency and others with large working-class populations have fewer life chances, and they are getting worse—it is an absolute scandal. College education is in crisis. Again, this should be a source of anger.

Glasgow city council has an opportunity to help some of the most vulnerable in Glasgow. Homeless Project Scotland has a food and night shelter in the Merchant City in Glasgow. It serves free hot meals and provides an immaculately clean shelter for homeless people. However, it has had its planning permission refused. The shelter is at serious risk of closing, but I am heartened to hear that Glasgow city council has said:

“We are available to engage...and do whatever we can to help them secure suitable property”.

I hope that the council does that. It has two golden keys to a resolution. It has an extensive property portfolio and it is the planning authority. I cannot think of an organisation better placed to help.

I helped at the shelter on Sunday night. That night, it served over 100 men and women, but because children are also homeless in Glasgow, it serves them too. On Sunday night, there was a boy—just like my boy—with his dad, a teenage boy with his mum, and a girl perhaps the same age as my daughter. If the shelter is closed, where will those children and their mums and dads get a hot meal? Where will the most vulnerable in my city get a safe bed for the night? I hope that Glasgow city council delivers on its promise.

6.53 pm

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Maureen Burke) on securing this debate and on her heartfelt speech about the impact of poverty in her constituency. My constituency of Glasgow North, which adjoins hers, also faces many of the same factors that contribute to low life expectancy—factors that are clearly linked to poverty.

Recent data from the Office for National Statistics has shown that the average life expectancy in Glasgow North is 75.9 years, which is 8.7 years shorter than in the healthiest parts of the UK. However, in a way, that number also acts as a smokescreen. Because it is an average that includes the most affluent areas, it conceals the true life expectancy of the most deprived communities in my constituency. Where someone is born, where they live, and even which streets they grow up on, can help determine how long they live. Although the figures highlight a shocking level of health inequality, they ultimately reflect the deeper and more complex realities of poverty. Poverty does not come from one place; it stems from a web of economic, social and cultural factors. Those are shaped by issues related to class, health, social security, wages, job security, education, housing and access to credit, to name just a few. It is the way that those pressures interact, often reinforcing one another, that sustains the poverty that we see in Glasgow and across the country.

The history of place can accentuate those issues, Glasgow's history being an example. The deindustrialisation of the city combined with the lack of necessary support, planning and investment in the late '70s and '80s led to mass unemployment and growing inequalities that are still felt in communities today. Although the previous Labour Government made great progress combating child poverty rates, that has not been sustained. Subsequent national policy choices and global events have only made those systemic issues of poverty worse, with the

[*Martin Rhodes*]

financial crash, the cuts to public services from Tory austerity and the long-term impact of a global pandemic hampering Glasgow's prosperity.

Poverty can also create vicious cycles, which can appear in many different aspects of someone's life. For example, if someone's job is insecure, it is harder for them to afford stable housing. Without a fixed address, it is harder for them to access social security. Without that safety net, the risk of homelessness rises and the cycle continues. That is why it is not enough to talk about employment alone. We need to ensure that work provides security and pays a real living wage. I welcome this Government's decision to uplift the minimum wage, a vital move that ensures that more people can earn enough to live with dignity. The Employment Rights Bill will go further, ending exploitative zero-hours contracts and helping to ensure that anyone in paid work has stability and protection.

But let us be clear: no single policy will solve poverty. What is needed is a joined-up approach—one that brings together housing, health, education, employment and social security. That is why the Government's focus on building houses, improving the education system, restoring the NHS and promoting economic growth is vital to helping to deliver for those who are most vulnerable. I am also confident that the work of this Labour Government's child poverty taskforce will be vital in delivering a cross-Government child poverty strategy to reduce and alleviate child poverty. That will be essential in improving children's lives and life chances now and address the root causes of poverty in the long term.

Glasgow is a city of immense potential, rich in culture, talent and resilience. The fact that some of its communities have the lowest life expectancies in the UK is not an inevitability—it is the result of decisions taken in the past. If we make different choices, we can build a city and a country where every child has the opportunity to thrive and every community the chance to prosper. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say in her response.

6.58 pm

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Butler. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Maureen Burke) on securing this important debate and on being such a doughty champion for her constituents.

Poverty is experienced by many communities across Glasgow, as we have heard, and my constituency of Glasgow West is no exception. In 2022-23, 19.3% of all people in Glasgow were income-deprived, compared with 12.1% in Scotland across the board. In Glasgow in 2023, 41.1% of secondary pupils were registered for free school meals. The figure for Scotland is just 13.2%. The Drumchapel/Anniesland ward in my constituency has the greatest depth of poverty in Glasgow. That is a lot of statistics, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East says, there is a family or an individual behind every single one.

Earlier this year, I held a child poverty taskforce event. The submission from that has been fed into the Government's taskforce. It was attended by many organisations that work with children and families in

Glasgow West. The stories they told and the evidence they offered were truly shocking. One participant, a volunteer with a youth club, reflected on her experience of taking a group of children on a day out and giving each child £5 to buy lunch. One child asked if he could forgo lunch and give the money to his mum so that she could buy bread and milk for the family. As you will gather, I find that story horrific, but that is the reality for many children who are all too aware of the financial pressures that their parents are facing. In effect, it takes away their ability to enjoy their childhood and be children.

As we have heard, since 2013-14 the funding received by Glasgow city council has reduced significantly, putting severe pressure on services across the city. Hopefully, the record settlement that this Government has passed to the Scottish Government will allow them to address what is now chronic underfunding. Over recent years, I have been disappointed that the SNP administration in Glasgow has not seemed to feel it either necessary or required that it should challenge its colleagues in the Scottish Government at Holyrood about that funding situation, because it should not have been allowed to continue.

We have heard a lot about the mortality rate in Glasgow. I will not rehearse that; I will just say that we have known for a very long time that health inequalities, housing conditions, educational opportunities and poverty are all connected. A lifetime ago, I worked in the health service, and we were proud of but challenged by the Black report, which drew attention to all those facts. We have known about them since 1980, and have had the opportunity to do something about them over the years. We made some progress under the Blair Government, and we began to look at poverty, particularly child poverty, in the early days of the Scottish Parliament, but we need to do much more. All these issues are connected. If one part of that jigsaw is in the wrong place, the life chances and life opportunities of all those families and young people are badly affected.

I close by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East again. She was absolutely right to be challenging about what we all have to do, what all Governments have to do and what all local authorities have to do. It is only by working together that we will begin to make a difference for the people who rely on us to do that.

Dawn Butler (in the Chair): I would like to leave a couple of minutes at the end for the mover of the debate to wind up. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

7.2 pm

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Maureen Burke) for securing this important debate and for her very moving speech. It is clear that she is committed to her constituents.

We need to break the cycle of inequality. As we heard, on the streets of north-east Glasgow and in parts of my constituency of Mid Dunbartonshire—including Auchinairn, which neighbours Glasgow North East—too many young people begin life weighed down by poverty rather than uplifted by potential. Across Glasgow, 33% of children are growing up poor, but that figure rises to over 37% in the Glasgow East constituency, the highest rate in Scotland.

Behind every percentage point are hundreds of pupils whose concentration is broken by hunger, and whose homework, if it is done at all, is done under blankets because the heating is off. New figures from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation reveal that 6 million people in the UK today are living in “very deep poverty”, and nearly half a million of them are in Scotland.

Poverty on that scale is not just a social failure. It is an economic own goal and a drag on growth. The OECD has long shown that inequality depresses GDP by stunting skills and productivity. A cold, hungry child suffering from illness and missing school is unlikely to become the skilled, creative adult our economy needs. We need investment, not in handouts but in the human capital that will pay Scotland dividends for decades.

Three interventions stand out. First, we must extend free school meals to every child in poverty throughout primary and secondary school. Scotland rightly offers universal provision in primary 1 to 5, yet pupils in primary 6 and 7 and early secondary school still fall through the net. Research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies finds that a reliable, nutritious lunch raises attainment by the equivalent of two months’ learning each year and boosts lifetime earnings. That is growth economics in a dinner hall: healthier children today, higher productivity tomorrow, and lower long-term welfare and NHS costs.

Secondly, we must make every home in north-east Glasgow and beyond warm and efficient. The Warmer Homes Scotland programme helped over 7,000 households last year, cutting bills and carbon alike, and demand has soared as energy prices climb. Accelerating retrofits in social housing across the region would create skilled jobs and boost economic activity through local supply chains. For families, it means that money saved on energy bills can be spent on essentials such as food, school shoes or a local after-school club.

Thirdly, we must ensure universal access to NHS dental care for all children. Despite school dentists, all too frequently families simply cannot get an NHS dentist. Routine care is being missed and tooth decay remains one of the leading causes of hospital admissions for children. That is not just a public health failure; it is a productivity issue. Dental pain keeps children off school, affects their speech and self-esteem and entrenches disadvantage. Good oral health must be seen as a core part of a child’s educational and developmental success.

Kirsty Blackman: I spoke in a debate in Westminster Hall on NHS dentists a wee while ago. Something like 95% of people in Scotland are registered with NHS dentists, whereas the figure in the England is that only about 50% of adults will ever see an NHS dentist in their life. Is the hon. Member making this case specifically for Scotland? I would love to hear more about where the gaps are in service provision in Scotland.

Susan Murray: That is not my experience in my constituency of Mid Dunbartonshire. We did a survey recently that showed that there was quite a lot of difficulty in finding an NHS dentist, and that many people who were with NHS dentists found that they were moving to private practice. In fact, I know of many constituents in east Dunbartonshire who are travelling to Springburn to reach an NHS dentist, so they have to travel quite a long distance.

Tackling poverty means addressing the full range of barriers that hold children back. Hunger, cold homes and preventable health issues are among them. Those are devolved levers that Holyrood can and should pull. The Scottish child payment is a start, but Westminster must also play its part. The Liberal Democrats are calling on the UK Government to tackle child poverty by removing the two-child limit and the benefits cap, and to reduce the wait for the first payment of universal credit from five weeks to five days. Instead, a UK-wide poverty premium continues to strip cash from low-income households through their higher tariffs and costlier services.

Scotland cannot build fairness on funding shortfalls. Hungry children cannot learn. Cold, unwell children cannot thrive. Nourished pupils, warm homes and healthy children are the engines for future growth. By investing in all our children, school meals, energy efficiency and basic healthcare access, we will not only spare a generation the misery of deprivation, but unlock the skills, health and enterprise that can power north-east Glasgow and the whole of the United Kingdom to a more prosperous future. This is not just a moral choice; it is the smart one, both socially and economically.

7.9 pm

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): May I start by acknowledging the very powerful speeches that we have heard this afternoon from the Members for Glasgow? I would not say that my view is that the people of Glasgow are generally well represented by Scottish Labour, but they have been very well represented in this debate.

I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Maureen Burke) for the way she highlighted the tragedy of low life expectancy and of poverty in general in her constituency. She mentioned Easterhouse, which occupies a particular place in the pantheon of Conservative thinking about welfare because my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) visited it 20 years ago and had his epiphany about what she described as the context of poverty. He described the interconnectedness of the different factors that drive poverty, which go so far beyond simple income poverty—issues around welfare itself but also joblessness, family breakdown, addiction and so on.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes) talked about the long consequences of deindustrialisation, which are relevant across our country but especially in places such as Glasgow. He also mentioned the consequence of the 2008 global financial crisis.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East mentioned the stagnation of wages in her constituency. Low wage growth has been a problem across the United Kingdom since that time. When my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green became the Welfare Secretary in 2010, he introduced reforms that offered real, direct benefits and improvements in welfare and in worklessness. There were 1 million fewer workless households in 2020 than in 2010 and, after housing costs, 1 million fewer people in absolute poverty—100,000 fewer children, 200,000 fewer pensioners and 700,000 fewer working-age people in poverty.

The last Government did make a real impact on poverty. Nevertheless, I want to acknowledge some of the points that have been made in this debate. The fact

[*Danny Kruger*]

is that the fiscal situation that we inherited and the choices made by the coalition Government meant that insufficient support was given to people who needed it, particularly as a result of cuts to local authority budgets and reforms to the DWP budgets.

I echo what the hon. Member for Glasgow North East says about the neglect of Glasgow under the SNP since devolution and over the past decade, but I do not agree with her about the value of the reforms being introduced by the new Government. What we have seen is a rushed effort driven by the imperative to balance the books in consequence of a failed Budget last year, leaving a real crisis in the public finances that is now being felt by the recipients of benefits. The Government are balancing the books on the backs of the people least able to sustain that weight.

John Grady: On failed Budgets, my constituents go to the shops with terror at the rising prices that followed the Budget of Liz Truss and Kwasi Kwarteng. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is the very definition of a failed Budget—one that plunged many of my constituents into poverty?

Danny Kruger: I am not going to defend the mini-Budget to which the hon. Gentleman refers, but I do not accept that the rise in prices that all our constituents have experienced are solely, or even in large part, due to that event. They are a result of wider global events—and since this Government came in, I am afraid to say, of a failed economic policy that has driven the necessity of the disability benefit cuts that have been introduced and the winter fuel payment cut, causing 10 million people to lose a vital part of their income. Since the cut, 100,000 more pensioners have been admitted to A&E and 50,000 children have been plunged into poverty in consequence of what is happening at the DWP.

I am very concerned about the announcement of cuts to the benefits regime before the review of the assessment system that gives people the entitlement to benefits. We have a genuine failure at the DWP. In addition to that, jobs are being destroyed by Treasury decisions to raise national insurance on employers, drive up energy costs and introduce a new Bill that will make employers much less keen to take on new workers.

My suggestion to the Minister, if she will allow me to make it, is to rethink the changes to winter fuel payments. I am conscious that in Scotland the Scottish Government are taking over responsibility for this area of policy and I echo the point made by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) that it would be good to hear from the Minister about how the interaction of the benefits reforms will work in the light of Scottish Government policy. I also hope that the UK Government will rethink the disability benefit cuts until we get the review of the eligibility assessment schemes. We need more support for people who need help to navigate the system and get into work.

Let me return to the point I made in response to the reference to Easterhouse by the hon. Member for Glasgow North East. We need to attack the drivers of poverty—the interconnected factors that account for the demand for welfare, which is so high. It is social breakdown rather than purely DWP systems that account for the high—

indeed, unsustainable—benefit bills that we have. We need to grow the economy to create jobs—good jobs, as the hon. Lady said, that will be right for Glasgow and right for the UK.

7.15 pm

The Minister for Employment (Alison McGovern): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Maureen Burke) on securing this debate on a topic that could hardly be more important. I will take the transcript of this debate as a submission to the child poverty taskforce because Members have made significant points today. I know that my colleagues in the ministerial taskforce and in the Child Poverty Unit in the Cabinet Office will read the transcript of this debate with interest, because, as I say, Members have made very important points.

I thank the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), and my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow East (John Grady), for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes) and for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson), for their contributions. I had the pleasure of reading the submission from the child poverty taskforce event that my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West held recently. I, too, read the story of the child she mentioned. We should not apologise for engaging emotionally with this issue, because nothing matters more than the fortunes of our kids in this country.

I also thank the hon. Member for Mid Dunbartonshire (Susan Murray). I welcome all the contributions that have been made as we move towards the publication of our child poverty strategy. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North recently met some of my DWP colleagues at the Springburn Jobcentre Plus office. I hope that she found them to be really helpful, because they will have enjoyed meeting her. I encourage all Members from all parties to engage with their local DWP teams in their local jobcentres. They are brilliant human beings and all constituency MPs can get a lot out of working with them, so I thank my hon. Friend for doing just that.

As has been made evident by this debate, poverty is a stain on this country, and tackling it is a priority. Our plan for change as a Government includes giving children the best start in life, as well as raising living standards in each and every part of the United Kingdom. Reducing poverty is vital to achieving both those ambitions, and to the lives and life chances of millions of people living in hardship right now. That hardship has been caused, as Members have said, by a combination of social and economic failures.

I feel an affinity with Glasgow. It is a wonderful city and shares many features with my own Merseyside. As on Merseyside, Glasgow's industrial past of shipbuilding and the long-running effects of deindustrialisation have had huge consequences. One of the points that has come out of this debate really clearly is that all of that not only has poverty consequences but consequential health impacts. I know that picture in Glasgow and it is true for my home as well, so I feel it. These problems are acute and places like Glasgow have felt the consequences of policy failures over a very long period. We have heard some of the statistics already. Glasgow, the city, has the second highest level of people on out-of-work benefits in Britain. That is not a good enough future for a wonderful city.

In my role as Minister for Employment—though in my life, many times before—I have been fortunate to be in Glasgow to hear directly about not only the problems that the city faces, but the opportunities and the work to support people in Glasgow. Last October, I was pleased to meet a number of partners tackling child poverty there. We see good results when we are able to join up support for people, and that is the kind of approach I want to feed into our child poverty strategy when it is published. I apologise in advance for not being able to give all the details of what will be in the strategy, but I know that Members will understand and be patient. The strategy, which we are all anxious to have, is coming.

The DWP in Scotland is working closely with partners in Glasgow, including on identifying where we can join up support to make it better and employers that can help to give people a good chance in life. In November, as part of the child poverty taskforce, I was fortunate to meet child poverty charities, experts, parents and children in Glasgow. They told me their stories, their challenges and their priorities, putting those into the development of our strategy, which is focused on increasing incomes, reducing costs and supporting families with better local services, so Glasgow will influence it. We have heard from people, as we have done again today. We understand what they need. This has to be a cross-Government strategy. Members have mentioned health, housing and education, and we will work across the UK Government and with the Scottish Government to ensure that it is an effective strategy.

I will take a moment to describe action we have already delivered to tackle the scourge of poverty. We have taken some urgent steps before being able to publish the strategy. We extended the household support fund, which councils in England can use to support low-income households, so there was extra funding for Scotland through the Barnett formula. That support is there for crises, which is important, but beyond that, we know that we need to act on incomes and ensure that people can do better.

Just last week, therefore, our fair repayment rate for universal credit came into effect, reducing how much people in debt can have taken off their benefits to pay what they owe. A maximum of 25% of someone's universal credit standard allowance has been reduced to 15%. On average, affected households will benefit by £420 a year, reducing the impact of debt on people. As my dad always used to say, "Out of debt, out of danger." As a result of the change, 110,000 of Scotland's poorest households will now be better off. That marks the Government's first step into a wider review of universal credit to ensure that it works to help lift people out of poverty.

Thanks to our commitment to the triple lock, more than 1 million pensioners in Scotland will benefit from as much as £470 a year being added to their state pension this year, following the increase we implemented last month. That is on top of the biggest-ever pension credit take-up campaign, helping to drive up claims by 81% in the 30 weeks since July, compared with the same period a year earlier.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East asked a couple of questions about the Green Paper and our proposed changes. She asked me specifically about end-of-life care—I agree that the work of Marie Curie

and others is deeply impressive. The DWP supports people nearing the end of life through the special rules for end of life. Those rules enable such people to get faster and easier access to certain benefits without needing to attend a medical assessment or to serve waiting periods. In most cases, they receive the highest rate of benefits. Those rules have been extended to apply to people who have 12 months of life to live, rather than six months, so that people can receive that vital support through the special rules six months earlier.

My hon. Friend also asked me about new employment support and how we will protect people where work is simply not possible. That is a really important point, because we know that there are people who need to be protected. The Green Paper outlines how we will consult on that and work on our safeguarding policies to make sure the process of protecting those people is improved. My particular passion on employment support is making sure that people are treated with real dignity, and that our fantastic frontline staff in jobcentres are able to see the person in front of them, not for it to be a box-ticking exercise, but to make sure that person has access to great opportunities. That is the whole point of our employment support changes.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North asked about the process in Scotland. That will be finalised as we get towards the White Paper in autumn. As she pointed out, we need to make sure that we have got the solution right for Scotland. We will work with the Scottish Government to do that.

In her maiden speech last year, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East said:

"Education and further education are a route out of poverty. It gives you a sense of achievement, self-belief and the confidence that anything is possible."—[*Official Report*, 15 October 2024; Vol. 754, c. 765.]

My hon. Friend was absolutely spot on with that sense that anything is possible. She was also right when she said earlier that poverty is theft, because you rob people of that sense of what is possible when you leave them with the indignity of poverty. That is why our whole strategy is about giving people chances and choices in life, with them learning skills and gaining qualifications. We are creating more good jobs through the modern industrial strategy. It is about unleashing the full potential of great cities like Glasgow so they have the growth and prosperity that they should have. Good jobs, with our plan to make work pay, will put money in the pockets of people in Glasgow and give them the dignity, self-respect, chances and choices that they deserve.

We need radical change to the help that we give people to escape poverty and to get a good job, but we need the whole Government to act together, and with devolved Administrations, collaborating in work that will see people do much better. I know that Glasgow is a wonderful place, which I have been welcomed to many times, but I also know the truth of what we have heard today—that people in Glasgow are robbed of years of good life that they should have, because of the shame of poverty. I am glad to be able to work with good colleagues from all parties who care about ending poverty to get the right set of policies in our strategy and to make those policies real, so that people have the chances, choices and dignity they deserve.

7.28 pm

Maureen Burke: I will have to talk quickly. I thank the Minister for her speech. I put on the record that the Springburn jobcentre is doing an amazing job at getting people into work; I was blown away by what they are doing, and wanted to state that here today. I thank all Members for their contributions; it has been a very good debate. We are here because we care for our constituents.

On a more personal note, I have to say that people are, and will be, dying sooner than they should. My sister died in her 30s, leaving her 10-year-old girl behind. My brother died in his early 50s with pancreatic cancer. My mum died of a heart attack. I know what it is to lose people, and it is all because of where they lived and

what shaped their life. Was it their fate being where they were—where we were brought up? There is lots more that I wanted to say, but I obviously do not have time. This has been a great debate. I am here for my constituents, and for the loss that I felt that I do not want anybody else to feel going forward. I thank the Minister for being here and I thank everybody for their contributions. Thank you, Ms Butler, for giving me this opportunity.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered poverty in Glasgow North East constituency.

7.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 6 May 2025

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Media Act 2024: Public Service Broadcasting System Regulations

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): Part 1 of the Media Act 2024—which received Royal Assent on 24 May 2024—amends part 3 of the Communications Act 2003 to modernise the UK’s system of public service broadcasting.

The public service broadcasting system was last substantively updated in 2003, prior to the emergence of video-on-demand services and global streaming services. The changes introduced by the Media Act are therefore vital to ensure that our public service broadcasters have the flexibility to serve audiences across the UK with high-quality programmes on a wider range of services.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport has already begun the process of bringing the provisions of part 1 of the Media Act into force. However, before the remainder can be brought into force, secondary legislation will need to be made to implement various technical changes to ensure the legislation will operate as intended.

With that in mind, I am pleased to inform the House that I am today publishing two draft statutory instruments on gov.uk:

The Broadcasting (Regional Programme-making) and Broadcasting (Original Productions) (Amendment) Regulations 2025—If made, these regulations would amend the Broadcasting (Original Productions) Order 2004 to update relevant defined terms to align with the amendments made by the Media Act. The regulations would also confer powers on Ofcom to determine whether “repeats” may be counted towards the modernised original and regional productions quotas of each public service broadcaster (other than the BBC).

The Broadcasting (Independent Productions) Regulations 2025—If made, these regulations would update terminology and set the level of the modernised independent productions quota for each public service broadcaster in a way that seeks to replicate the effect of their existing (non-modernised) quotas.

The Secretary of State is required to consult Ofcom, the BBC and S4C before exercising her powers to make these statutory instruments. Separately, Ofcom has a general duty to consult each holder of a public service broadcasting licence before amending any licence conditions, including those relating to the determination of appropriate quota levels.

These draft instruments are being published to support this consultation work. It should be noted that they may be subject to further amendment prior to laying and that, once laid, they will be subject to the draft affirmative procedure, requiring debate and approval in both Houses before they can be made. I will provide a further update to the House at that time.

[HCWS616]

DEFENCE

Veterans Support: A New Approach

The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns): As the nation celebrates VE Day, we are announcing a new UK-wide veteran support system, called VALOUR, to ensure veterans have easier access to essential care and support.

The nation owes a duty to those who have served to defend our country, and it is only right that the Government step up our support to them.

This Government’s commitment to veterans was set out clearly in our manifesto: we will ensure veterans have access to the support they need, and we will put the armed forces covenant fully into law. Since entering government, we have worked closely with veterans, the service charity sector and others to understand the needs and experiences of veterans and considered whether the current support system for them is working.

The armed forces set most people up for success in life, but when veterans need help, support is too often a postcode patchwork.

There is a range of brilliant statutory and non-statutory support available to veterans throughout the UK. However, too many veterans still struggle to access the help they need within their communities. That is why we are announcing a new initiative backed by £50 million of funding, known as VALOUR.

The new VALOUR system, named to celebrate the courage of our veteran community, will work with enterprising health, employment, and housing charities to shape more tailored local support for veterans.

We will establish a new network of VALOUR-recognised support centres across the UK to connect local, regional, and national services—while harnessing the power of data to shape better services. New regional field officers will bring together charities, service providers and local government to provide more evidence and feedback driven support for veterans across housing, employment, health, and welfare.

This marks a major milestone in meeting this Government’s manifesto promise to fully implement the armed forces covenant. The field officers will work with local government bodies, to act as conveners and share best practice and guidance. This will include applying the principles of the armed forces covenant, the nation’s promise to support the armed forces community and their families.

Our veterans served with valour. Now our VALOUR support network will help ensure our country repays their courage.

This Government are delivering on our plan for change and renewing the nation’s contract with those who serve.

I look forward to updating Parliament with more detail about VALOUR soon.

[HCWS619]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Electricity Security and Decarbonisation: Government Responses

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): I am tabling this statement to inform Members of two publications relating to the capacity market. Both publications are Government responses to the recent consultation and call for evidence on proposals to maintain our electricity security and enable flexible capacity to decarbonise. This supports our goals of making Britain a clean energy superpower by 2030 and accelerating progress to net zero.

The Government are committed to delivering clean power by 2030 and accelerating progress towards net zero, while ensuring the security of supply. Making Britain a clean energy superpower by 2030 is one of the Prime Minister's five missions. Being on track for clean power 2030 is the Prime Minister's plan for change milestone for this Parliament.

To deliver this mission, we will rely even more on renewable power. This will result in a wholesale shift in our long-term power system. The variable nature of renewables makes it critical that we have sufficient flexible capacity that can be ramped up quickly when generation from renewable sources is low, such as on dark, still days. The clean power action plan published in December 2024 projected that we will need 40 GW to 50 GW of dispatchable and long-duration flexible capacity in 2030 to support our power system and maintain security of supply.

This will require accelerated deployment of low carbon flexible technologies. The Government are already investing in low carbon technologies to support the transition away from unabated gas. In the meantime, the clean power action plan is clear that we will continue to rely on around 35 GW of existing unabated gas, until it can be safely replaced by low carbon alternatives that can provide the flexibility needed to keep the system balanced at all times.

Since its introduction in 2014, the capacity market has acted to secure sufficient capacity to ensure consistent and reliable electricity generation. In October 2024, we consulted on proposed changes to the CM to help maintain our existing ageing gas capacity. The Government response to the CM consultation commits to supporting the economic case for lifetime extension of ageing plants, vital for security of supply. It will do this by lowering the scale of planned works needed to access three-year CM agreements.

While we need to maintain our existing unabated gas capacity, the clean power action plan is clear that we will see a fundamental shift in the role and frequency of unabated gas generation. Unabated gas will move from generating almost every day, to an important strategic reserve role, used only when essential. By 2030, unabated gas generation will make up no more than 5% of Great Britain's total generation in a typical weather year.

The Government response published today reiterates our intention to ensure that unabated gas plants can decarbonise once low carbon flexible technologies are available. We are introducing two further CM reforms:

New decarbonisation readiness legislation comes into effect from February 2026 and will ensure that all substantially refurbishing and new combustion plants are built decarbonisation-ready. We will modify the CM to ensure that all plants prequalifying for the CM in 2025 that would be captured under the new DR legislation commit to comply with the DR requirements.

We will introduce a first managed exit pathway to enable unabated gas generators with multiyear CM agreements to exit early without penalty and transfer to bespoke support, facilitating decarbonisation by retrofitting carbon capture.

We are also publishing a Government response to the CM call for evidence, which aimed to inform further option development to support the decarbonisation of unabated gas and the approach to developing longer-term views of future capacity requirements and supply. This Government response summarises the feedback received.

The CM reforms we are introducing will ensure that the CM can continue to uphold its primary objective of ensuring security of supply, while also playing a crucial role in achieving the clean power mission.

[HCWS617]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

River Basin Management Plans: Court of Appeal Judgment

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): This Government inherited a sector in disrepair and in dire need of widespread reform after 14 years of Conservative failure. The Government know that essential, widespread reform is needed to fix a failing water sector.

The Government welcome the judgment of the Court of Appeal in the case of Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed) v. Pickering Fishery Association, which was handed down on 2 April.

The judgment clarifies the requirements of the water framework directive and the domestic regulations which implement them.

DEFRA will work together with the Environment Agency on how to deliver improved river basin management planning consistently with the Court's conclusions.

Given the significance of the judgment, we will lay out more detail on any revised approach in light of the judgment as soon as practicable and we will keep Parliament informed of developments.

This work will also support the development of ambitious future reforms this Government will be making to the water sector to ensure the health of our water environment.

Comprehensive reform is needed to restore our rivers, lakes and seas to good health, and ensure that the water sector works for both customers and the environment. Through these reforms we can begin to regain public trust and restore our rivers, lakes and seas for current and future generations to enjoy.

We recognise the current system is not fit for purpose, which is why we launched an independent water commission, which is looking at widespread water sector reform including the effectiveness of the water framework directive and

river basin management plans. The commission will report to the UK and Welsh Governments this summer and both Governments will respond and consult on proposals. The commission's final recommendations will shape future action to transform how our water system works and clean up our rivers, lakes and seas for good.

[HCWS618]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Independent Commission on Adult Social Care: Terms of Reference

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): The Independent Commission on Adult Social Care, chaired by Baroness Louise Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, formally launched on 29 April with a meeting with people with first-hand experience of the social care system. Today, I am updating the House that we have published the terms of reference. A copy has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and on gov.uk at

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-commission-into-adult-social-care-terms-of-reference/independent-commission-into-adult-social-care-terms-of-reference>

A copy can also be found on the commission's website at

<https://caseycommission.co.uk/about/terms-of-reference/>

The commission, reporting to the Prime Minister, will work with people drawing on care and support, their families, staff, parliamentarians, local government and the public, private and third sectors to make clear recommendations to define and build the adult social care system that will meet the current and future needs of our population. The commission will consider older people's care and support for working-age disabled adults separately, recognising that these services meet different needs.

Split over two phases, the commission will set out a vision for adult social care, with recommended measures and a road map for delivery:

The first phase, reporting in 2026, will identify the critical issues facing adult social care and set out recommendations for effective reform and improvement in the medium term. It will recommend tangible, pragmatic solutions that can be implemented in a phased way to lay the foundations for a national care service. The recommendations of this phase will be made within the Government's spending plans which will be set out at the spending review.

The second phase, reporting by 2028, will make longer-term recommendations for the transformation of adult social care. It will build on the commission's first phase to deliver a more preventative model of care needed to support our ageing population, and how to best create a fair and affordable adult social care system for all.

The challenges facing adult social care—from inconsistent standards of care to an undervalued and overstretched workforce, and a lack of support for unpaid carers—are complex and deeply rooted. There have been plenty of good ideas in the past 15 years, but we have been missing the broad consensus we need to find a solution around what our country wants from social care so that it stands the test of time.

That is why Baroness Casey has been tasked with starting a national conversation on what people expect from adult social care as well as building cross-party consensus. Given the independent nature of the commission, Baroness Casey and her team will take any future discussions with political parties forward.

While an independent commission is necessary to address the challenges facing the sector, the Government are taking immediate action to improve it. We are making available up to £3.7 billion of additional funding for social care authorities in 2025-26, we have increased the carer's allowance earnings limit and introduced legislation that is paving the way for the first ever fair pay agreement in adult social care. The Government are also taking forward a range of initiatives for 2025-26 including announcing new measures to professionalise the workforce, uplifting the disabled facilities grant, promoting better use of care technologies, enabling frontline care and health staff to digitally share up-to-date information, and changes to the better care fund.

I am confident that, with Baroness Casey's leadership and experience chairing this momentous commission, and with help and support from across the House, she will set us on the road to fundamental reform that will build an adult social care system fit for the future.

[HCWS615]

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