

**Wednesday
14 May 2025**

**Volume 767
No. 137**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 14 May 2025

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Digital Landlines: Rural Communities

1. **Markus Campbell-Savours** (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that rural communities are supported in the transition from analogue to digital landlines. [904157]

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): One of the things that keeps me awake at night is how we ensure that people are protected—the most vulnerable and rural communities in particular—as we transition from the copper network to fibre. That is why I was glad that, in November last year, I was able to get all the network operators to sign up to a new code of conduct that will, I think, provide precisely that protection.

Markus Campbell-Savours: Dominic's aortic aneurysm burst at his rural home five years ago. With no phone signal in their stone-built house, it was a 50-minute landline call to emergency services that helped his wife keep him alive while they waited for an ambulance. As Dominic waits for more open heart surgery, can the Minister reassure his family that we are doing all we can to mitigate the risks to him and other vulnerable people during power cuts?

Chris Bryant: I certainly can. I send my best wishes to my hon. Friend's constituent. He said that it is a stone-built house; he is absolutely right that there are particular difficulties with mobile signal in stone-built houses—I live in one myself, in Porth in the Rhondda. One thing that we have done recently, as a result of the pressure that I have put on people, is to ensure that the battery back-up power is not just the Ofcom-guaranteed one-hour minimum, but considerably longer, and that is what lots of the operators are now providing.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): What awareness is there in very rural areas where there is not great broadband coverage and very poor indoor mobile phone coverage—sometimes no coverage at all—of the effect of this change, particularly in places where there are frequent and sometimes extended power cuts? When can we expect a full national awareness campaign?

Chris Bryant: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's comments—I am glad that he is expressing an interest in this issue. He took part in a Westminster Hall debate on it only a few weeks ago, when I was a bit grumpy with him, for which I apologise. He makes some good points. He may not be aware of the campaign, which is already up and running, so obviously the awareness campaign needs to do a bit more work to make him aware of the awareness.

Broadband: Rural Communities

2. **Steff Aquarone** (North Norfolk) (LD): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of rural broadband coverage. [904158]

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): Rural broadband coverage simply is not good enough.

Steff Aquarone: Many rural villages in my constituency still suffer from poor broadband access, with no clear date for when it will get better and more demands for huge expenditure to get them connected to the network. I think particularly of residents in Banningham, who have suffered from poor broadband access for years and feel they are at the bottom of the pile. In Finland, the broadband roll-out started with the hardest-to-reach properties and reached inwards, tackling the biggest challenges first. Does the Minister agree that a roll-out strategy like that, rather than one that goes for the easiest properties first, would have served those communities better and faster?

Chris Bryant: The largest chunk of broadband delivery will be done on a commercial basis by the private sector. We do not want to do with taxpayers' money what could probably be done by the commercial sector. I did not catch the name of the village that the hon. Member referred to. I am not sure whether he has been to one of my Building Digital UK drop-in sessions, but if he needs further information for that particular village, I would be very happy to try to sort it.

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): In my constituency, residents of the rurally isolated community of Balquhiddy did not wait for a major provider; they dug and laid 34 km of fibre optic cable themselves using the Government's broadband voucher scheme to partner with a small business and deliver gigabit broadband—a remarkable achievement. That success is now at risk, however, because for well over a year the Government payment processes have been struggling to engage with the volunteer-led project. Will the Minister meet me to help resolve that, and will he join me on a visit to the beautiful Balquhiddy glen to see at first hand what that resourceful and determined community have delivered?

Chris Bryant: Everybody tells me that Balquhiddy is very beautiful—in fact, my hon. Friend told me earlier this morning. I would be interested in a visit if it were also possible to visit the new film studio that I think might be coming to his constituency. Stirling is one matter, but Strathallan and the very wide rural areas in his constituency are different. I would be very happy to try to sort out the specific issues that he has in Balquhiddy.

Digital Inclusion

3. Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): What steps his Department is taking to improve digital inclusion in Bathgate and Linlithgow constituency. [904159]

8. Sadik Al-Hassan (North Somerset) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve digital inclusion in North Somerset constituency. [904164]

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): It is important that we have the right data on which places are missing out. That is why, as I have said before, I am desperate to ensure that, if people check Ofcom's online announcements on coverage in their area, it matches their lived experience. I can announce that Ofcom will be radically changing its online coverage network system. I have placed a letter in the Library today between myself and Ofcom which lays out when we will do that in June.

Kirsteen Sullivan: I welcome the investment in my constituency from Project Gigabit's £157 million deal to upgrade Scotland's broadband. The remote jobs market opens up employment opportunities for those who live outside the major cities. However, several constituents from more rural areas around Bridgend, Armadale, Bo'ness and Bathgate have told me that they have lost out on opportunities for flexible working, and even lost jobs due to poor connectivity. Can the Minister reassure my constituents that they will not lose out on future opportunities because of where they live?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: in a digital world, we cannot have some people engaged and who have the connectivity they need while others do not, because that simply will not drive forward economic growth in this country. She makes a very fair point, and yes I can give that guarantee.

Sadik Al-Hassan: I thank the Minister for his response. During my recent visit to the Nailsea & Backwell disabled access café, I had the privilege of meeting remarkable residents such as Alison. A recurring theme emerged about accessing Government services, which often assumes internet access and capability. What additional measures is the Department implementing to ensure that everyone in North Somerset, particularly those with disabilities or limited digital skills, can access vital Government forms and assistance in formats that truly work for them?

Chris Bryant: There are so many parts of delivering our public services where we can improve productivity if we manage to do so on a digital basis. I am conscious that, for example, a Doncaster hospital still employs 42 people just to carry around physical medical records. That is clearly nonsense and we need to change it. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: if we go to a digital future we must be able to take everyone with us. That must mean that non-digital options should be available to those who are not able to take up digital options.

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): My constituent John wrote to me to highlight the slow and weak internet connectivity in Boyatt Wood. Meanwhile, constituents who live in the centre of Eastleigh regularly struggle to

get online. Does the Minister agree that all my constituents deserve access to fast and reliable broadband? What assurances can he give them that that is a priority for the Government?

Chris Bryant: I would argue that her constituents have a right not only to good broadband—if the hon. Lady wants to come to one of my Building Digital UK drop-in sessions she would be very welcome; we can go through street by street if necessary—but to mobile connectivity. I bet there are people in her constituency, as there are in every constituency in the land, who see on the Ofcom checker that they have a perfect signal and know that they do not. That is one thing that I am changing with the deal I have done with Ofcom.

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): There are some really good examples of the delivery of innovative products that provide access in remote and rural areas and some good small-scale providers, but in the Cairngorms national park area a provider recently unexpectedly ceased the service. Consumers have been left out on a limb, so is it time to put in place, as with the energy system, consumer protection should a provider fail to provide a service?

Chris Bryant: I have long thought that digital connectivity is now akin to a connection to electricity, water or any other public utility. That is how we should treat the law, and I think that would assist the hon. Gentleman's constituents.

Innovation: Hertfordshire

4. David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support innovation in Hertfordshire. [904160]

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle): The Government are committed to supporting innovation in Hertfordshire and across the country, and we are investing a record £20.4 billion in research and development this financial year alone. In the last financial year, UK Research and Innovation invested £67 million in projects in Hertfordshire. For example, more than £650,000 was awarded to Copco Ltd, which is based in Hemel Hempstead, to develop a digitally enhanced low-cost technology in aerostructures.

David Taylor: I was fortunate enough to visit the British Standards Institution in Hemel Hempstead recently to see its work helping businesses to deliver better products and drive towards a more sustainable planet. Its research shows that 78% of UK companies increase turnover and productivity because of the BSI's standards. What steps are the Government taking to support more companies to adopt and certify standards, such as the BSI's AI management systems standards, so that we can grow the UK tech sector and enable innovation and collaboration safely and securely?

Peter Kyle: I am extremely grateful for my hon. Friend's question; it shows how diligently and assiduously he is working for the businesses in his constituency. I can assure him that high standards lead to their adoption, and this Government are committed to the very highest of standards. I saw that myself on visits to Hertfordshire: I visited Airbus and the tech firm Autolus, which are both doing cutting-edge work to the highest of standards, contributing to innovation in our country as well as the area that he represents so well.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister is right that such work is helping not just Hertfordshire but everywhere else. He has been a regular visitor to Northern Ireland and has taken a specific interest in cyber-security there. Has he had the opportunity to interact with companies in Northern Ireland to ensure that we can benefit from the expansion of the cyber-security industry?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's recognition that I have a personal commitment to Northern Ireland, which I recently visited for the second time. This Government are committed to cyber-security right across the United Kingdom. The budgets for it and their application are subject to Barnett consequentialities. I know that he will be working with the devolved Administration to ensure that that money is spent wisely, and in central Government they will have the partner they need.

Artificial Intelligence: Environmental Impact

5. Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential impact of AI on the environment. [904161]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Feryal Clark): DSIT works closely with other Departments, including the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, to align AI energy demand with future energy planning to ensure long-term sustainability. We understand that AI is an energy-hungry technology, which is why we have set up the AI energy council. Through that council, we are assessing ways to address the growing energy demands of AI and AI sustainability, including by exploring bold clean energy solutions, from next generation renewables to small modular reactors.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: We know that AI has the power to transform civilisation, but its huge drain on the environment is a problem. For example, ChatGPT has an estimated 57 million daily users, but for every five to 50 questions it is asked, 500 ml of water are used to cool down its data centres. The Minister has explained some of the work that is being done and I understand that the AI energy council is looking at energy solutions to align the Government's AI ambitions with our net zero goals, but with the increased incidence of drought and the overall climate emergency, what steps are the Government taking specifically to manage water consumption and sustainability with their AI ambitions?

Feryal Clark: I assure my hon. Friend that the Government are committed to ensuring that AI development aligns with sustainability goals. We welcome the advances in cooling technologies, such as dry cooling and closed-loop systems, in addition to promoting the use of renewable energy resources. I chair the AI Ministers group, which brings together Ministers from all Departments to co-ordinate cross-cutting challenges, including water consumption.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): The astonishingly successful GrowUp vertical agriculture project in Sandwich, in my constituency, is highly dependent on data, which could be hugely assisted by artificial

intelligence. I understand that agriculture is not represented on any of the working parties. Will the Minister seek to ensure that agriculture is included and possibly find time to visit the project?

Feryal Clark: As I have set out, we have inter-ministerial meetings that bring Ministers together, including Ministers from DEFRA. The Secretary of State regularly meets representatives from the National Farmers Union and other Secretaries of State to discuss these issues.

UK-US Trade Agreement: Digital Services Regulation

6. Mr Tom Morrison (Cheadle) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to ensure the adequate regulation of digital services, in the context of the UK-US trade agreement. [904162]

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle): I congratulate the Prime Minister and the Business Secretary on the UK-US trade deal, which, among many provisions, includes the commitment to deepen digital trade. My Department will continue to work across Whitehall to strengthen the transatlantic trade relationship that benefits our country so greatly. When it comes to online harms, we will continue to strengthen those provisions too.

Mr Morrison: Many of my constituents have contacted me with concerns around social media and public health. Nearly 40% of children report that social media has a negative impact on their mental health and, with glaring holes in the Online Safety Act 2023, dangerous smaller websites remain unregulated. Can the Secretary of State confirm that protections for children will not be up for negotiation in any deal with the United States?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful for that question. I certainly share the hon. Gentleman's concern for the welfare of young people online, which is why so many provisions have been brought in since I came into office, including issuing a statement of strategic priorities to Ofcom, tackling intimate image abuse and getting right behind the implementation of the new regulations from January and age verification, which will come in in July. We are behind those as well as working on what will come next and strengthening it. I reassure him and the House that online harms are never up for negotiation under this Government.

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

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I really welcome the US-UK trade deal and the fact that the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister kept their commitment not to put online safety on the table in those negotiations. My Committee's inquiry into social media misinformation and algorithms has heard evidence that the algorithms in social media drive the spread of misinformation, and we saw the consequences of that in the summer riots. Will the Secretary of State confirm that, as well as not watering down the Online Safety Act, he will look to strengthen it and is discussing how to do so with our allies in the US?

Peter Kyle: I reassure my hon. Friend that I am looking very closely at how we strengthen the online safety regime in order to protect children further into the future. I have commissioned research into the exact causal relationship between which products young people use and the impact that they have on them, and I will act accordingly from there.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Given the growing concerns around the Online Safety Act, which could be weakened during UK-US trade negotiations, and reports that the Secretary of State is meeting repeatedly with tech giants, including Amazon, Google and Meta, it is vital that children's safety remains a red line in both our trade policy and our ongoing, evolving data protection framework. I welcome the comments that he made around the fact that online harms will not be up for negotiation, but can he confirm that the Online Safety Act will not be up for negotiation in the UK-US trade deal now or in the future?

Peter Kyle: We have just delivered a deal between the UK and the US, and none of it weakened any of the legislation we have that keeps children safe in this country. We were promised by the Conservatives that we were at the front of the queue for a US trade deal; this Government took us out of the queue altogether and delivered the deal. The previous Government took a decade; we delivered the deal, and we are strengthening the rights that young people have to keep them safe, not weakening them.

Public Sector Productivity: Technology

7. **Luke Murphy** (Basingstoke) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on using technology to help increase levels of productivity in the public sector. [904163]

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle): This Government are piloting a range of technologies, including generative AI and large language models, across Departments in order to release their potential to boost public sector productivity. We are aiming for a smarter, smaller state, and that is exactly what we will deliver.

Luke Murphy: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. The Government are rightly focused on driving public sector reforms through the smarter use of technology, and in Basingstoke we have seen what is possible. ICS.AI has already helped Derby city council to save millions of pounds using AI. GemaSecure, another local firm, is developing home-grown tech to help to protect vital infrastructure from cyber-threats, and TBSC has produced software to reduce costs wasted on unused IT subscriptions by up to 25%. Will the Secretary of State join me in Basingstoke to meet those firms and others to discuss how his Department can work with them to help to achieve our mission of building a more efficient, secure and modern public sector?

Peter Kyle: My hon. Friend is highlighting the great work coming out of Basingstoke, which will not just contribute to the productivity of local authorities around the country but benefit our entire economy. I can assure him that this Government are committed to harnessing

the power of British technology, putting it to use for citizens across our country and for productivity in Government, and I look forward to engaging more with the companies he has mentioned.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The use of AI in radiotherapy planning increases productivity twentyfold, yet the Government's decision to stop funding for AI contouring is estimated to cost waiting lists half a million extra days. Will the Secretary of State intervene and talk to his friends in the Department of Health and Social Care to make sure that they restore that funding and save lives?

Peter Kyle: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are investing heavily in AI technology across the NHS for the benefit of patients. I have visited Huddersfield hospital, where AI has been fully integrated into the radiography department. I will look into the specific issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised, and if there are any conversations to be had, I can assure him that we are on the side of patients and of harnessing technology for the good of patients.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Accurate data is important, particularly in the public sector—we will be voting on this later today. How will the Secretary of State measure his planned productivity improvements? How will he define success, and over what time period?

Peter Kyle: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are deploying technology to deliver productivity gains across Whitehall, which are starting now. We are investing heavily through the digital centre that we created in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and working intensively with Departments such as the Department for Work and Pensions and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs. We have already identified billions of pounds-worth of savings, which will be put to use within Government without delay for the benefit of citizens.

Topical Questions

T1. [904171] **Laura Kyrke-Smith** (Aylesbury) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle): This Government are harnessing the power of technology to create a smarter, smaller state. My Department is partnering with the Department for Work and Pensions and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to understand how AI can save taxpayers' money and deliver the world-class public services that people deserve. At the same time, we are tearing down the barriers facing businesses that want to invest in Britain. Last month, we welcomed experts from across the energy and tech sectors to the first meeting of the AI energy council, at which we discussed how we can use clean energy to power our domestic AI sector and deliver strong growth and good jobs right across the country.

Laura Kyrke-Smith: I met Jess and Hannah from Aston Clinton in my constituency, who are doing brilliant work to encourage parents to delay giving their children

smartphones. Responding on Second Reading of the safer phones Bill, the Minister for digital, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant), agreed that excessive smartphone usage is detrimental to the physical, mental and spiritual health of young people, and confirmed that the Government intend to act in this area. Can the Secretary of State share what his next steps will be?

Peter Kyle: I agree with my hon. Friend; excessive smartphone use is detrimental to children, as it is to MPs across the House. I can assure her that I am commissioning evidence on the impact of social media use on children. I am looking particularly closely at the addictive nature of some of the algorithms being deployed, and at how we can act to keep children safe and benefit their welfare.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Labour has cancelled Britain's new national supercomputer at the University of Edinburgh, damaging our research capability and economic growth. That project was fully funded by the Conservatives, and the university says that it will be a disaster if the cancellation is not reversed, so will the Government reinstate that supercomputer, or will it be another victim of the Chancellor's failed economic experiment?

Peter Kyle: It surprises me that the hon. Gentleman continues down this path. One of the first decisions I had to take after becoming Secretary of State was how we deal with an unfunded commitment for hundreds of millions of pounds where the money never existed—the Treasury had not committed it. Not a single letter had gone to my Department from the Treasury, yet the previous Government spent years making verbal commitments. We will deliver a compute strategy that is fit for purpose, that will get our country where it needs to be—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are not going to get everybody in, Secretary of State.

Alan Mak: That project was fully funded, and the Secretary of State knows it. While Labour cancels our tech investment, our competitors—the US, Germany and Japan—are all increasing theirs. Next month, the Chancellor will cut the Department's budget in real terms, so can the Secretary of State tell us today whether he will allow the Treasury to cancel more investment in Britain's future, or will he finally speak up for Britain's vital tech sector?

Peter Kyle: We will release the compute strategy. That strategy will be fully funded and fully delivered—unlike under the Government, which the hon. Gentleman was part of, that let our country down.

T2. [904172] **John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): There are incredible dividends from digital for government administration and service delivery, but some older and vulnerable constituents tell me that they cannot use smartphones or are not online and are worried about being left behind. I am liaising with Citizens Advice, the local council, Age Concern and others to take action locally to help them. Can the Minister reassure me that sufficient advice, support and funding will be

made available to my constituents to ensure digital inclusion as we rightly seek to utilise digital far more effectively?

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are older people, and others for that matter, who either have no online access or do not have a smartphone, who would not be able to access things in a digital world. That is why we introduced a digital inclusion plan, and that is one of the key differences between a Labour Government and a Tory Government: they did not have any interest in digital inclusion and they did not have a plan for 10 years, and we brought one in.

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I welcome to the Gallery the Speakers of Anguilla, Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Montserrat and St Helena.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [904141] **Lorraine Beavers** (Blackpool North and Fleetwood) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 14 May.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): Over the past week, we have secured a historic trade deal with India and a landmark agreement with the United States, protecting and creating British jobs, slashing tariffs and driving economic growth. We have also published a White Paper setting out how this Government will end the open borders experiment of the Conservatives, bringing net migration down, backing British workers and delivering fair control of our borders.

I know that the whole House will also want to mark the 40th anniversary of the Bradford City fire. We remember the victims of that devastating tragedy and celebrate the strength of the community.

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

Lorraine Beavers: Fourteen years of Conservative cuts have stripped the Environment Agency of the resources and the staff it needs to properly deal with badly managed landfill sites blighting communities like mine. The Jameson Road landfill site in my constituency of Blackpool North and Fleetwood has been producing toxic stench for more than a year now, causing nosebleeds, headaches, vomiting and breathing problems for my residents. Will the Prime Minister commit to ensuring that the Environment Agency has the staff and resources to police such badly managed sites across the country, so that it can act swiftly and effectively to protect communities like mine?

The Prime Minister: I love the fact that when anyone says 14 years of a Conservative Government, Opposition Members all go, "Oh no." That is how the country feels. Once again, a hard-working Labour MP is clearing up the mess that was left behind. My hon. Friend's residents deserve far better, and we expect rapid improvements.

We are closely monitoring air quality and will not hesitate to take further action. She is right that we must tackle rogue operators who blight our communities. That is why we have boosted Environment Agency funding by £188 million, alongside tough new rules on incinerators and commercial fly-tippers.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): If I may, Mr Speaker: Sir Roy Stone served 13 Chief Whips, and Prime Ministers from Margaret Thatcher to Boris Johnson. I would like to pay tribute to his extraordinary service and send my best wishes to his family.

Before we start, I would also like to say to the Prime Minister how horrified I was to hear about the attack on his family home. It is completely unacceptable, and I think I speak for the whole House when I say that it was an attack not just on him, but on all of us and on our democracy.

Yesterday we learned that unemployment is up 10% since the election. Why does the Prime Minister think unemployment is rising on his watch?

The Prime Minister: May I pay tribute to Roy Stone as well, and the service that was given to us in various capacities?

I thank the Leader of the Opposition for her words about the attacks on me and my family, and many others for their kind messages in the past few days. The Leader of the Opposition messaged me pretty well straightaway, which I really do appreciate. She is absolutely right that it was an attack on all of us, on democracy and on the values that we stand for.

The right hon. Lady comes here every week to talk the country down. We have got 200,000 new jobs, record investment and four interest rates cuts—contrast that with the disastrous Liz Truss mini-Budget, inflation through the roof and a £22 billion black hole.

Mrs Badenoch: I am not sure that the Prime Minister even knew that employment was up, but there is no point in him blaming everyone else. The fact is that the Conservatives reduced the deficit every year until the pandemic, more than doubled the personal allowance, left 4 million extra jobs, tackled the post-pandemic inflation spike, and left the fastest-growing economy in the G7.

Let us talk about what is happening today. Let us look at Beales, a 180-year-old department store in Dorset. It survived two world wars and the winter of discontent, but it could not survive this Labour Government. Beales is having what it calls a “Rachel Reeves closing down sale”. What does the Prime Minister have to say to all the people who have lost their jobs?

The Prime Minister: Nobody wants to see job losses, but the right hon. Lady must be the only person left in the country who thinks that the economy was booming after the last Government. We have created new jobs, record investment and trade deals. The last Government tried to do the India deal for, I think, eight years and failed—we did that deal. They talked about a US deal—we did that deal. We also intend to get a stronger relationship with the EU.

This former Trade Minister must be the only former Trade Minister who is against all trade deals that boost our economy. She says she is against the India deal, even though it contains the same provisions that she put on the table; she is against the US deal, even though it saves thousands of jobs in car manufacturing; and most absurdly, she says she is going to rip up the EU deal when she has not even seen what is on the page. The Opposition have been reduced to this brain-rot: a once great political party is sliding into brain-dead oblivion.

Mrs Badenoch: I am very happy to welcome the Prime Minister's tiny tariff deal, but the fact is that it has put us in a worse position than we were in in March. He should not over-egg the pudding.

Let us talk about how things are getting worse now. In every month of this year, household names like Sainsbury's, Tesco, Asda and Santander have cut staff numbers. The Office for National Statistics estimates that there are 100,000 fewer jobs than there were a year ago—and that was before the Prime Minister's jobs tax, which will make things worse. Can he promise the House that by this time next year, unemployment will be lower than it is today?

The Prime Minister: I think the right hon. Lady just said “tiny tariff deal”. Can I suggest that she gets the train to Solihull, which takes two hours, and tells the workforce at Jaguar Land Rover, and their families and communities, that she would rip up the deal that protects their jobs? When she has done that, she might travel across to Scunthorpe and tell the steelworkers there that she is going to rip up the deal that saves their jobs; then, if she has time, she could go up to Scotland and tell the people at the whisky distilleries that she would rip up the deal that is creating 1,200 jobs for them, boosting their exports; and then she can come back here next week and tell us what reaction she got.

Mrs Badenoch: I did not hear a promise to get unemployment down, and that is because the Prime Minister knows things are going to get worse. This goes wider than businesses. Last week I met staff and patients at Farleigh hospice. They do fantastic work, but they need to find an additional £250,000 to pay the jobs tax. How does the Prime Minister suggest that Farleigh hospice—a charity that relies on donations—pays for his tax hike?

The Prime Minister: We have provided a £100 million boost for the sector, and children and young people's hospices received £26 million of funding this year.

The right hon. Lady turns up every week to carp from the sidelines. She moans about what we had to do in the Budget to stabilise the economy, but she has not got the courage to stand there and say that she would reverse our decisions on national insurance contributions, and I know why: it is because she does not want to say she is against the £26 billion investment in our NHS, she does not want to say she is against the £1.2 billion more for our police, and she does not want to say she is against the £3.2 billion more for our schools. All the time, she does not have the courage of her convictions, and it shows that her criticism is totally confected.

Mrs Badenoch: I cannot believe the Prime Minister is still using that figure. We have had this very conversation at the Dispatch Box—he knows it is just capital spending.

Either he is not paying attention or he is saying things to disguise what is going on. That money will not pay for the jobs tax. He knows that, and the hospices know it too.

The other people who know that things are getting worse are the five leading business groups in the UK. They say that his so-called Employment Rights Bill will be “deeply damaging” to growth. Does the Prime Minister accept that they are right, or does he believe that he knows better than business?

The Prime Minister: It is the same old Tories every time: better rights for workers are on the table, and they vote against them. Respect, dignity and protection at work are good for workers, good for the economy and good for growth.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister needs to listen to business. We cannot have employment rights without employment. Labour always forgets that it is not Government that creates growth; it is business that creates growth. Businesses are closing, and they are blaming him and his Chancellor. There are 100,000 fewer jobs. Hospices, charities and nurseries are facing bills from the jobs tax that they cannot afford. Even the unions say workers are being thrown on the scrapheap, and all of this before his unemployment Bill makes hiring even more expensive. When will he admit that Labour isn't working?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady says we should listen; she should listen to business—it is in favour of our trade deals. The India deal is a fantastic deal, with tariffs on cars cut to 10%, tariffs halved on whisky and gin, and £4.8 billion coming into our economy. What does she say she would do with the India deal? She wants to rip it up. The US deal saves thousands upon thousands of jobs. What does she want to do? She wants to rip it up. The EU deal will be good for our economy. She is not even going to wait to see what it says; she absurdly says she is going to rip it up. It is so unserious. She was even reduced last week to accusing the Indian Government of fake news—no wonder she did so badly as a Trade Secretary. The project for the Conservatives is over. They are sliding into oblivion; they are a dead party walking.

Q2. [904142] **Rachel Taylor** (North Warwickshire and Bedwary) (Lab): Thousands of British jobs have been safeguarded by this Government's trade agreement with the US, including for those in my constituency who work for Jaguar Land Rover, like my next-door neighbour Ollie—proving that when Labour negotiates, workers win. Can the Prime Minister confirm that he will continue to stand up for all workers and our vital motor manufacturing industry as he negotiates a better deal for Britain around the world?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her work with JLR and for standing up for the jobs in her constituency. The deal that we have agreed saves thousands of jobs in our car industry, securing the livelihoods of countless families. I have been up to JLR on a number of occasions, including last week. I know at first hand what it means for the workforce, their families and their communities—and the Leader of the Opposition says she would go and tell them that she is

going to rip it up. She should go up there—[*Interruption.*] Well, she says she is going to go against it. What did the Reform leader say about JLR? He said JLR deserves to go bust. Shame on him! Labour is striking deals in the national interest.

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

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): On behalf of my party, may I offer heartfelt congratulations to His Holiness Pope Leo XIV? May I also offer our support to the Prime Minister and his family after the appalling arson attacks on his home? I echo his thanks to our brilliant police and firefighters.

Three years ago, the previous Government were faced with a choice. Their own Migration Advisory Committee told Ministers that recruiting more care workers required improved conditions, career progression and better pay, but the Conservatives chose not to do that and instead brought in large numbers of care workers from overseas. The carers looking after our loved ones in care homes should be thanked, not demonised. Will the Prime Minister now do the things that the Conservatives refused to do, starting with a higher minimum wage for carers?

The Prime Minister: May I first thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments about me and my family? I really appreciate it.

It is important that we have fair pay for care workers, and that is why we have put in place our fair pay agreement. This is the first of its type. It will be applied first to care workers to ensure that they get fair pay, but also a better framework for progression. As he will know, most people leaving care work are going to the NHS because of the pay and the ability to progress. Our fair pay agreements will deal with, making sure that in the future those jobs are more secure. I will just add a declaration of interest: my sister is a care worker—I know at first hand how important the work is and how difficult sometimes the situation facing them is.

Ed Davey: I thank the Prime Minister for that reply. It is a good first step, but we will still see people earning more in Amazon warehouses and supermarkets than in care homes, and that will mean our loved ones going without the care they need.

Turning to the middle east, for more than 10 weeks Israeli forces have blocked food, water and medicine getting into Gaza. There is now a humanitarian catastrophe, with 2 million people at risk of famine and one in five facing starvation. Rather than ending this crisis, the Netanyahu Government are planning to seize all Gaza indefinitely. I know the Prime Minister will agree that the blockade of Gaza should end and I am sure he will agree that it would be appalling if Netanyahu proceeds with that escalation, but will he act now and pick up the phone to President Trump for a joint plan to recognise Palestine and get food, water and medicine into Gaza?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising this, because the situation in Gaza is simply intolerable and getting worse. We are working with other leaders urgently to bring about the rapid and unimpeded flow of humanitarian aid into Gaza, which is desperately needed—obviously, alongside the release of hostages and getting back to a ceasefire—and that

work is going on through my team 24/7. I do believe that that is the initial action that needs to be taken, but I still fundamentally believe that, however remote it may seem at the moment, the pathway to a two-state solution is the only way for settled and lasting peace in the middle east. We will continue with our allies to pursue that path.

Q3. [904143] Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): Found in my constituency, Durdle Door is one of the most iconic bathing sites in all the country. Last Friday, I was joined at Durdle Door by my hon. Friends the Members for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes), for Bournemouth West (Jessica Toale) and for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan)—and, most importantly, by Ron the local seal—to test the water quality. Currently, water quality at bathing sites is monitored only from mid-May to September, which puts at risk the health of all water users, who could be swimming in pollution or sewage. With that in mind, will the Prime Minister work with me and my hon. Friends to introduce all-year-round testing at popular bathing sites such as Durdle Door?

The Prime Minister: Everyone enjoying our beautiful beaches, lakes and rivers is entitled to know that the water is clean and safe. That is why we are modernising outdated bathing water regulations, including more regular monitoring sites to reflect local demand. After years of failure by the Conservative party, we are acting through our plan for change with new powers to tackle pollution, including banning bonuses, jail terms for law-breaking bosses and real-time monitors of every sewage outlet.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Llefarydd. This Prime Minister once spoke of compassion and dignity for migrants and of defending free movement. Now he talks of islands of strangers and taking back control. Somebody here has to call this out. It seems that the only principle he consistently defends is whichever he last heard in a focus group. So I ask him: is there any belief he holds that survives a week in Downing Street?

The Prime Minister: Yes, the belief that she talks rubbish. Mr Speaker—[*Interruption.*] Mr Speaker, I want to lead a country where we pull together and walk into the future as neighbours and as communities, not as strangers. The loss of control of migration by the last Government put all that at risk, and that is why we are fixing the system based on principles of control, selection and fairness.

Q4. [904144] Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): Council tax is the most regressive and unfair tax in this country. It has become a tax on deprivation: the less affluent an area, the more you pay; the greater your need, the more you pay. A band D property in Westminster pays just £1,017 a year. In Hartlepool, it is £2,495 a year. For a band H property, the difference between the two areas is £3,000. It is hammering people in towns like Hartlepool. Does the Prime Minister agree that this unfairness cannot continue? Will he commit to addressing this inequality once and for all?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend; he has been a dedicated campaigner on this issue for a very long time. As he knows, 14 years of mismanagement by

the Conservative party left councils on their knees, with a total failure to improve and update how councils are funded. Through £69 billion of funding this year and the upcoming multi-year settlement—the first in over a decade—we will give councils far greater certainty and stability. Our detailed funding review will create a fairer system to make sure that his constituents see strong, affordable local services.

Q7. [904147] Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): While the Prime Minister prefers to take to the international stage, back here at home Labour's Birmingham bin strike is now in its 10th week. Rubbish is still piled on the streets and recycling goes uncollected, and the reputation of the west midlands is being trashed. His Ministers continue to wash their hands of this and his mayor does not even want to talk about it. Will the Prime Minister come to the west midlands and sort this out, because at the moment it is only the squeaky blinders that are winning?

The Prime Minister: Further evidence of the decline of the Tory party: they say that going to Ukraine at the weekend to try to secure peace for Ukraine, for the security and defence of Europe, is somehow the wrong priority. That conflict has already massively impacted people in this country through the cost of living crisis and energy. Ukraine, Europe and we deserve peace, and to live in peace.

Dealing with the bin strikes is a priority. We continue to call on Unite to suspend the strike immediately and bring the disruption to an end. We are supporting the council to ramp up the cleaning operation. We are now collecting over 1,100 tonnes of waste every day and continue to offer our support so that the backlog does not reappear.

Q5. [904145] Sarah Smith (Hyndburn) (Lab): Last week, I visited Sacred Heart primary school in Hyndburn, where the excellent teachers expressed their frustration at the current special educational needs and disabilities system. One wonderful boy, despite being non-verbal and requiring personal support, has been waiting for over 18 months for an education, health and care plan. There is a risk that he will not get a place in a school for the year ahead that suits his needs. How will the Prime Minister ensure that the voices of parents and children are at the heart of the SEND reforms that the Government will bring forward?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend; she is a powerful champion on this issue. Our principle is that every young person with special educational needs should receive the right support to succeed. We have immediately announced an additional £1 billion for high-needs funding, including almost £20 million for schools in Lancashire. We will support special schools, and deliver truly inclusive places and expertise in mainstream schools to help every child thrive.

Q8. [904148] Nigel Farage (Clacton) (Reform): We at Reform, a party that is alive and kicking, very much enjoyed your speech on Monday. You seem to be learning a very great deal from us. But can I encourage you please to go further as a matter of national security? Over the weekend, an illegal immigrant from Iran, who we believe came by boat, was arrested in the

north of England on serious charges of terrorism. Since the speech on Monday, 1,000 undocumented young males have crossed the English channel. Does the Prime Minister agree that now is the time to declare the situation in the English channel a national security emergency?

Mr Speaker: It was not my speech; it was the Prime Minister's.

The Prime Minister: The situation is serious. The last Government lost control of the borders. We are taking powers—[*Interruption.*] This is precisely to the hon. Gentleman's point. The Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill is the first Bill to give counter-terrorism-like powers to law enforcement, precisely so that we can get in before the crimes are committed and before people get to this country. This is the most far-reaching provision ever for law enforcement to defend and secure our borders. That is why it is extraordinary that he, of all people, voted against it, and sooner or later he is going to have to explain that.

Q6. [904146] **Amanda Martin** (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Since my election, I have championed and backed our country's plumbers, builders, electricians and all our tradespeople, who are not just building Britain, but holding our communities together. That is why I have been campaigning for tougher sentencing and action on tool theft, and for the real cost of this crime to be recognised. I thank everyone in the sector who has backed the campaign, because together we have shown that the message is clear: after 14 years of Government neglect, it is time for action and change. Will the Prime Minister work with me and the Secretary of State for Justice to include my private Member's Bill as we review sentencing and justice, so that the punishment finally fits the crime?

The Prime Minister: I commend my hon. Friend for leading the campaign to highlight the devastating impact of these crimes. For hard-working small businesses, tool theft is not just a violation; it can mean thousands of pounds of potential work lost, with a huge impact on businesses and families. We are investing more than £1.2 billion extra in policing, with 13,000 new neighbourhood police officers to focus on the crimes that impact on communities the most. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her work, and I know the Justice Secretary will look at the details carefully.

Q10. [904150] **Mr Andrew Snowden** (Fylde) (Con): Whether or not people agree with the Prime Minister's net zero targets, he must agree that he will not achieve those targets without taking people with him. The cable corridor and substation for the Morgan and Morecambe offshore wind farm is one of the most objected to national energy infrastructure projects in the country. What is angering me and thousands of others is that there is a perfect alternative cabling route further up the coast that would bring local economic benefit, would be more cost-effective as a whole lifecycle project and could connect to existing national grid infrastructure, but no one is listening. Will the Prime Minister now listen, pause the planning inquiry for the existing application and ask the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero to consider and cost the alternative route to avoid untold devastation to our coastline and countryside?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero is going through a quasi-judicial exercise, and I am therefore limited in what I can say. Let me do the best I can within those constraints. The project is going through its examination, where interested parties can and should put forward their views on the application. More broadly, as we drive forward renewable projects, the planning process is designed to ensure that impacts are carefully considered.

Q9. [904149] **Fred Thomas** (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): The United Kingdom has rightly helped to arm Ukraine with modern, effective capability, and we are sending it some £4.5 billion this year. However, after decades of relying on the peace dividend, our own forces are ill-equipped for modern warfare. With colleagues interested in defence technology, I am developing a proposal for a joint UK-Ukraine production hub on British soil, which would support Ukraine while modernising our own forces at warfighting scale and creating the jobs and know-how needed to rearm and stay secure. Will the Prime Minister use his good offices to support this proposal?

The Prime Minister: My hon. and gallant Friend is right that our iron-clad support for Ukraine should go hand in hand with firing up our own defence industries, which means well-paid, secure jobs right across the country, including in Plymouth, and strengthening our national security. We reiterated our support for Ukraine in Kyiv last weekend, and I am proud that British industries are playing their part in supporting Ukraine against Russia's illegal invasion. I will make sure that he meets the relevant Minister to discuss his proposal.

Q11. [904151] **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): People in the real world are disgusted by the Energy Secretary's obsessive pursuit of net zero at any cost. The Scottish Borders are under attack, with solar farms the size of towns, massive wind farms and now mega-pylons scarring unspoilt landscapes. Nobody sensible supports his crazed, crank policies, which will put jobs at risk and rip up farmland. When will the Prime Minister step in and stop his Energy Secretary throwing taxpayers' money at this nonsense?

The Prime Minister: Only a few years ago, dealing with the climate challenge was a shared endeavour across this House. It is yet further evidence of how far the Conservatives have fallen that they cannot see the significance and importance of tackling one of the major challenges of our time. I think we should rise to that challenge, not be defeatist about it. It is further evidence, as far as I can see, that the Tory project is just finished.

Q12. [904152] **Jake Richards** (Rother Valley) (Lab): Male suicide is a tragic epidemic in our country. Each week, almost 100 men take their own lives, and suicide is the biggest killer of men aged under 50. In my constituency, I am working with Andy's Man Club in Maltby, the Learning Community in Dinnington and Better Today in Kiveton Park to try to raise awareness about the fantastic groups that offer support for men in the most difficult circumstances. Will the Prime Minister use this opportunity to support the campaign that we are undertaking in my constituency and also

reassure those groups and my constituents that mental health services for men will be a priority for his Government?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this crucial issue. I know that Members across House will have their own personal and tragic experiences of suicide. We have launched a call for evidence on our men's health strategy, which will improve men's health in all parts of the country, including tackling devastatingly high suicide rates. We are also investing £26 million in new mental health crisis centres, funding talking therapies for 380,000 more people and recruiting 8,500 more mental health workers.

Q15. [904155] Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The plans to upgrade St Helier hospital, including the delivery of a new specialist emergency care building, have been put back by 10 years. I am talking to the trust about a way to bring all or part of those plans forward, but in the meantime there is a very real fear that some of the buildings on the existing estate are at risk of catastrophic failure before the decade is out. Will the Government reassure me that they will work with the local trust on a plan to maintain and adapt the existing estate to ensure that St Helier hospital can survive all the way through to the completion of the major works?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member's constituents have been badly let down by the previous Government's empty promises, which were never going to be delivered. We have put the new hospitals programme on a sustainable financial footing and increased the NHS capital budget to record levels, so that we can address the backlog of critical maintenance, repairs and upgrades. I will make sure that he gets a meeting with the relevant Minister to discuss that particular case.

Q13. [904153] Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes is the renewable energy capital of England, delivering home-grown, secure energy and boosting local skills. More than 12,000 people are employed in a clean energy job in Greater Lincolnshire, but those jobs are now under threat from Reform's new mayor, who has declared war on renewables, putting livelihoods at risk. What steps will the Prime Minister take to protect jobs by supporting the supply chain and delivery of renewable projects?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is a superb champion for energy security, driving down bills and the good secure jobs that renewables offer. Those on the Opposition Benches are climate defeatists—anti-jobs, anti-growth, anti-business and anti-investment—and they should try to peddle their policies to the tens of thousands of people in this country who work in renewables every single day. Those on the Opposition Benches do not think that Britain has the skills and they would deny us incredible opportunities. We are focused on securing billions in investment, creating tens of thousands of jobs and taking us off the rollercoaster of international fossil fuels.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): My constituent Victor Franklin was made severely disabled after a savage dog attack left him with multiple

amputations. Will the Prime Minister explain why pensioners, such as Victor, who become severely disabled after retirement are excluded from claiming personal independence payment and are instead limited to the lesser support of attendance allowance, and will he commit to reviewing that unfair rule?

The Prime Minister: May I extend my thoughts to Victor and the awful circumstances that the hon. Lady describes, which must be extremely challenging. We do have to reform the system because it is not working—I think there is general agreement about that—but the principles must be clear: we protect and secure those in need of protection and security; we help those who can work into work; and we believe that those who can work should work. We have to reform the current system to make it better, because what we have does not work.

Q14. [904154] Nesil Caliskan (Barking) (Lab): Every week, I meet families in Barking and Dagenham who tell me that they worry about paying their bills because they are on zero-hours contracts. My constituents want the chance to work hard in a secure job, earn a decent wage and have dignity in their workplace. As Labour's plan for change delivers the biggest uplift in workers' rights in a generation, does the Prime Minister agree that Reform MPs working and voting against our Employment Rights Bill show that they are no friend of workers in this country?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Let us be clear what the parties opposite voted against. Stronger statutory sick pay—they voted against. The right to guaranteed hours—they voted against. Protection from unfair dismissal—they voted against. Stronger protection for pregnant mothers—they voted against. A package worth £600 to the poorest workers in insecure work—they voted against. We are backing British workers; they vote against them at every turn.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): Maternity services in Yeovil are due to shut on Monday, after a deeply flawed Care Quality Commission inspection in January, and are to be moved to Musgrove Park hospital in Taunton, which does not have capacity for an extra 1,300 births a year.¹ Although the closure is initially for six months, I have received no guarantee that the services will open again, which is creating huge fear. Will the Prime Minister or the relevant Minister agree to meet me and colleagues from the south-west to stop this decision?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Member for raising this issue, which must be of concern. I am not across the details at this stage, but I will make sure that he gets a meeting with the relevant Minister to get to the bottom of the issue.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: That completes Prime Minister's questions.

Jake Richards: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During Prime Minister's questions, the Leader of the Opposition claimed that unemployment has risen by 10% since the general election. That figure is completely and utterly incorrect. It is no wonder that George

1.[*Official Report*, 19 May 2025; Vol. 767, c. 10WC.](Correction)

Osborne, the former Conservative Chancellor, has said that she has no economic plan if she cannot even get basic statistics right. Will the Leader of the Opposition return to the House and correct the record?

Mr Speaker: The accuracy of what a Member states is not a matter for the Chair, but you have corrected the record in your opinion. We will leave it there for now.

Gaza: UK Assessment

12.37 pm

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on the UK's assessment of the likelihood of genocide in Gaza.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): Yesterday, alongside partners, the UK convened a meeting of the UN Security Council in response to the intolerable civilian suffering and humanitarian need in Gaza. As I told the House yesterday, Israel's denial of aid is appalling. Tonnes of food are currently sitting rotting at the Gaza-Israel border, blocked from reaching people who are starving. Israeli Ministers have said that Israel's decision to block this aid is a pressure lever. This is cruel and indefensible. Overnight, yet more Palestinians have been killed in Israeli strikes. This must end.

The message yesterday was clear: the world demands that Israel stops and changes course immediately. With our allies, we are telling the Government of Israel to lift the block on aid entering Gaza now, and enable the UN and all humanitarians to save lives now. We need an immediate ceasefire now. Humanitarian aid must never be used as a political tool or military tactic, and the UK will not support any aid mechanism that seeks to deliver political or military objectives or that puts vulnerable civilians at risk.

The International Court of Justice case on genocide is ongoing. We support the ICJ. We support its independence. The ICJ issued a set of provisional measures in this case and we support those measures. Israel has an obligation to implement them. It is the UK Government's long-standing position that any formal determination as to whether genocide has occurred is a matter for a competent court, not for Governments or non-judicial bodies. The UK is fully committed to upholding our responsibilities under domestic and international law, and we have at all times acted in a manner consistent with our legal obligations, including under the genocide convention.

The devastation from this conflict must end. Our complete focus is on lifting Israeli restrictions on aid, on freeing the hostages, on protecting civilians and on restoring the ceasefire. We will work urgently with our allies and partners on further pressure to make Israel change course.

Adrian Ramsay: Overnight, the UN's emergency relief co-ordinator, Tom Fletcher, warned that a genocide was possible in Gaza. One in five people face starvation. The entire population is facing high levels of acute food insecurity. In Gaza, Gaza North, Deir al-Balah, Khan Yunis and Rafah, there is a risk of famine. There is one primary cause: Israel's aid blockade since 2 March.

The Security Council was told that civilians in Gaza have, again, been forcibly displaced and confined into ever-shrinking spaces, with 80% of the territory either within Israeli militarised zones or under displacement orders. Israeli airstrikes on the European hospital in Gaza yesterday killed 28 people, with further reports of at least 48 deaths overnight from strikes elsewhere. Can the Minister tell us whether the Foreign, Commonwealth

and Development Office has conducted any recent assessment of its own on the risk that the Israeli authorities are committing genocide?

Last night, the UK's ambassador to the UN rightly called on Israel to lift the restrictions and ensure a return to the delivery of aid in Gaza in line with humanitarian principles and international law. But that is not enough.

Notwithstanding the Government's position that it is for judicial bodies to make a determination, what is the Minister's response to the latest UN assessment that genocide is possible in Gaza? Can he confirm whether the UK stands by the obligation to prevent duty in the genocide convention? Parliament needs to know whether the UN emergency relief co-ordinator's assessment will lead to a shift in the UK Government's position. Why is it that when the horrors increase, the UK Government's position stays the same?

Lastly, to echo the words in Tom Fletcher's briefing:

"Will you act—decisively—to prevent genocide and to ensure respect for international humanitarian law?"—

or will you instead repeat—

"those empty words: 'We did all we could'"?

Mr Falconer: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for asking those important questions. The testimony of the emergency relief co-ordinator, the very most senior official in the world's entire humanitarian system, given last night at the UN Security Council meeting that we called with our allies, is clearly incredibly important. I can confirm to the hon. Member that we do abide by our international law obligations, including to the genocide convention, and we consider in all of our IHL assessments, which are ongoing, all the relevant tests—and we will continue to do so.

The hon. Gentleman asks important questions, which have echoed in this Chamber yesterday and throughout this long and painful conflict. This Government have taken steps, whether restoring funding, suspending arms exports or working with our partners in the UN and elsewhere. But clearly we are in a situation today that nobody in this House would wish to be in—nobody on the Government Benches and, I am sure, nobody on the Opposition Benches either.

We will need to take more and more action until we see the change that we need, but the central question, as I have told this House repeatedly, is that aid is not being allowed into Gaza. While it is not allowed into Gaza, there is nothing that can be done to get the aid at the scale and in the manner necessary to save Palestinian life. It is on that point that we called the Security Council and on that point that we will continue to act.

Mr Speaker: Order. May I remind Members not to use the word "you", because I am not responsible for some of those statements?

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): The Minister has repeatedly said that we do everything to observe international law. Will he please accept that there is a growing body of opinion that says that the UK is not doing that, and that we are not complying with our obligations if we continue to supply parts for the F-35 programme, because these are dropping weapons on children in Gaza? We cannot say that we

are observing the Geneva conventions, the genocide convention and Rome statute if we continue to supply those goods. He talks about doing all that we can. If that is the case, why on earth are we not making it abundantly clear to Israel that trading with it is not an option while this continues? So in answer to the question “Is he doing all he can?”, there are many people in this place and beyond who think that we are not.

Mr Falconer: I know my hon. Friend’s commitment to these issues over a long period of time. I do not accept the premise of his question. Whether or not we abide by our legal obligations is a question that will be determined by the courts. It is being determined by the courts this week, so I will leave it to the courts to make judgments on our obligations. We are taking all the steps that we can to bring this conflict to a close. He mentions the vital question of the F-35 programme. I know this House understands the significance of that programme, not just in Europe but across the world. The carve-out that we have put in place has been done on the basis of robust legal advice, which is being tested in the courts this week. We must abide by our obligations to our allies. We are not selling F-35s directly to the Israeli authorities. We continue to supply a global spares pool. That is necessary for the continued function of the F-35 programme, which has critical importance to European security. We make these judgments calmly and soberly, and we will continue to do so.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The situation in the middle east continues to cause concern. That is why we on this side of the House have been clear on the need to see the return of the hostages and a lasting ceasefire. Although we welcome the release of Edan Alexander, there are still 58 hostages held in Gaza by the Iranian-backed terrorists. Those who are still alive are being held in the most dreadful and appalling conditions, without access to aid and medicines. What they and their families have been going through for approaching 600 days is unimaginable. They must be released as a matter of urgency, so can the Minister give an update on the diplomatic steps being taken by the Government to secure the release of the remaining hostages, and what is Britain contributing to those efforts?

This conflict would have been over long ago, had Hamas released the hostages, and the House should not be in any doubt that Hamas and their Iranian sponsors are committed to wiping out the state of Israel. Can the Minister tell us what steps are being taken, with international partners, to deal with the threat to peace, security and stability posed by Iran? We have constantly asked for a strategy to tackle Iran, so when will this come forward? The Government have shared our view that Hamas can have no role in the future governance of Gaza, so can we have an update on the practical steps the Government are taking to secure this outcome and end the misery that Hamas are inflicting on Gaza and the threat they pose to Israel?

We have debated aid access to Gaza on several occasions, including in recent days, so can the Minister tell us exactly how much UK-funded aid, both directly and indirectly through multilateral organisations, is waiting to enter Gaza and give us a breakdown of what that aid is? The Government have known for a number of months

about the concerns Israel has about the delivery of aid to Gaza and aid diversion, so can the Minister today explain what discussions have taken place with Israel, and what practical solutions Ministers have offered to support the delivery of aid that addresses its concerns? Has the Minister been directly engaged in the discussions that have taken place with Israel and the US over alternative ways to get aid into Gaza? Does he have a view on this and will the UK be participating?

We have also been clear that while we continue to press for humanitarian aid and accountability, we do not consider the actions in Gaza to constitute genocide. The case brought by South Africa to the International Court of Justice is not helping—

Mr Speaker: Order. Can we please stick to the time? The right hon. Lady is almost a minute over. We have to work within the timescales, and Members need to time speeches. Lots of Members need to get in, and we have to support each other. I think the Minister has enough to go on.

Mr Falconer: I of course welcome, as the Foreign Secretary did yesterday, the release of Edan Alexander. I know the whole House thinks of those hostages who remain in Hamas captivity. I have been in direct contact with the American officials involved in that release, and it is a very welcome development. We are focused on ensuring that there is no role for Hamas in a future for Gaza. We are working as part of the Arab reconstruction plan to try to achieve that.

The right hon. Lady asks an important question about the proportion of British aid unable to get into Gaza at the moment. For almost two months, the horrendous answer is 100%. Even before then, there were significant restrictions on the aid that we wish to get into Gaza. I saw for myself the items that were unable to cross from al-Arish into Rafah. The proportions will be very high, but I will see with my officials whether I can break it down in greater detail for her.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Slow and agonising breaths, scared, crying, emancipated bodies fighting for every heartbeat—it is death by a thousand cuts for the children and for the parents watching their babies deliberately being starved to death. Almost 1 million children are at risk of famine and death in Gaza. Those who have stood by and allowed this to happen should hang their heads in shame. I call on the Government to sanction Israeli officials until the blockade is lifted, because if we do not act now, this will be on us.

Mr Falconer: I know the strength of feeling behind my hon. Friend’s words. I am sure she is aware of the findings of the IPC report on Monday, which delineates in great detail the precise suffering being felt because of a lack of food and nutrition. We are horrified by those findings. The need for action could not be more urgent.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): Israel’s continuing blockade of Gaza, now exceeding 70 days, is utterly unacceptable. Will the Government now recognise that the blockade constitutes a clear violation of international law? The Government must respect whatever determination the ICJ reaches regarding genocide. There

[Monica Harding]

are already clear obligations on the Government to prevent genocide in Gaza arising from the ICJ's January 2024 order. Have the Government taken any steps to meet those obligations? Will they commit today to banning the export of all UK arms to Israel? Will they reconsider sanctions on extremist Israeli Ministers like Bezalel Smotrich, who called for Gaza to be destroyed? Will the Government commit to the immediate recognition of a Palestinian state? As the UN's British relief chief told the Security Council yesterday, if we have not done all we could to end the violence in Gaza, we should fear the judgment of future generations. Does the Minister agree?

Mr Falconer: These responsibilities weigh heavily on me and on every member of the Government and the Foreign Office team. But let us not forget what this Government have done. Whether it is restoring funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency; suspending arms exports in the way we have described; providing £129 million of humanitarian aid and then being one of the loudest voices in trying to ensure that it enters Gaza; or working with Jordan to fly medicines into Gaza, with Egypt to treat medically evacuated civilians, with Project Pure Hope to help Gazan children in the UK, and with Kuwait to support vulnerable children through UNICEF; we are taking steps. We take the judgments of the ICJ incredibly seriously, but I cannot pretend to the House that the events in the Occupied Palestinian Territories of recent days are acceptable, and we will continue to take every step we can to get a change of course.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): Tomorrow is the 77th anniversary of the 1948 Nakba, which saw hundreds of thousands of Palestinians displaced from their homes. That still continues today, and the UN Security Council has said that action is now required to prevent genocide. A key step to a peaceful two-state solution would be recognising Palestinian statehood—something that Israel is trying to prevent. With 147 countries recognising Palestinian statehood, is now not the right time for the UK to do so, too?

Mr Falconer: The question of recognition of a Palestinian state is obviously one of vital importance. We want to do so as a contribution to a more stable region. We can see the serious and immediate threats to the viability of Palestinian life, and that is what we are focused on in these most urgent of days.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I have been a member of the Conservative Friends of Israel for over 40 years, longer than anybody here. Hamas is a brutal terrorist organisation that hides its own fighters under hospitals, but it is frankly unacceptable to recklessly bomb a hospital. It is unacceptable to starve a whole people. Is the Minister aware that many Friends of Israel worldwide, notwithstanding narrow legal definitions, are asking this moral question: when is genocide not genocide?

Mr Falconer: I have heard in recent weeks a series of powerful interventions from Opposition Members, and I take them seriously with the weight they hold, particularly

from the Father of the House and my neighbour in Lincolnshire. We will not move towards making determinations from the Dispatch Box on questions of legal determination, but that does not mean we will wait. The preliminary judgments of the ICJ and the provisional measures it set out are important, and we will abide by them.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): As the Minister has said, the situation is intolerable with one in five Gazans facing starvation; the use of aid as a weapon of war by Israel is inexcusable. The continued firing of rockets by Hamas and detention of hostages are also inexcusable, and it all must end. I welcome the UK, with our international allies, calling an urgent briefing on the situation at the UN Security Council. There, the UN humanitarian chief was clear in his warning about the dire consequences of the situation continuing. What steps are this Labour Government taking to get more aid in, get the hostages out and bring about the ceasefire and two-state solution that we all in this House desperately want to see?

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend, who I know has been long committed to these issues and used to be an aid worker herself. She is a doughty advocate on these points. We remain absolutely committed to a two-state solution. We are focusing all our diplomatic efforts on ensuring that the current approach is changed, that we return to a diplomatic solution, and that we have a ceasefire, the release of hostages and a move back to that two-state solution, which, as she rightly puts it, is vital.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): The situation in Gaza is clearly intolerable, and Israel has to find a way of getting aid in safely and without diversion. But does the Minister agree that we need to be very careful about the use of the word “genocide” and that we do not devalue the word? It is used to describe the systematic and deliberate murder of 6 million Jews by Nazi Germany. We must question whether—and I do not believe that—a war designed to release hostages and remove a terrorist threat, against terrorists that hide among the civilian population, crosses that threshold.

Mr Falconer: It is the long-standing position of Governments of all stripes that it is for international courts to make determinations of that nature, and we will abide by our obligations under international humanitarian law.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): Since 2 March, no food or medical aid supplies have reached over 2.3 million Palestinians. Many of us from across this House have attended many statements and Westminster Hall debates and have submitted parliamentary questions asking the Government about this critical issue. The hostages still remain in captivity and need to be released, but the reality is that using aid to punish so many people is wrong. Does the Minister agree that under the genocide convention, the UK as a state party has an obligation not only to prevent and punish genocide, but to avoid actions that may assist or enable genocidal acts?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend asks important questions about aid access and the nature of aid delivery. Let me be clear: the UK will not support any aid mechanism

that seeks to deliver political or military objectives or put vulnerable people at risk. The obligations under international humanitarian law and international law more broadly are clear, and they fall on Israel as the occupying power. It must abide by them.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Very few issues in politics, particularly international politics, are black or white, but this is one such issue. The Israeli Government are using collective punishment of the civilian Palestinian population, which is illegal under international law and contravenes the Geneva conventions, to which Israel is party. Does the Minister think that the British Government have lost their moral and legal compass in continuing their tacit support for Israel?

Mr Falconer: I have set out some of what the Government have done, and I could continue doing so for some time. Let me be clear. The hon. Gentleman rightly points out the absolutely appalling nature of any attempt to weaponise aid and use incendiary language, which are clearly breaches of international obligations. We have condemned from the Dispatch Box much of that language, some of which was repeated by the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding). I take this opportunity to say again that the British Government absolutely condemn that inflammatory language. We will continue to do so, and to make our views known to the Israeli Government, in the most forceful possible way.

Abtisam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The international community has failed to stop Israel's impunity. We have collectively failed to act on violations as they are committed, and to hold Israel to account. With our collective failure, Palestinians in Gaza face collective punishment. Israeli Ministers have stated that stopping humanitarian aid is one of their main levers of pressure. That is not only cruel and indefensible, but an explicit admission of violations of international law. I hear our condemnations, Minister, but I see no action. Why are we still sending arms? Why are we not sanctioning Israeli Ministers? The UN has said what many know to be true: as a signatory to the Geneva convention, we have a legal obligation to prevent genocide. Minister, when will we act?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend is forceful advocate on these questions. She points to failure, and I recognise that failure. So many days and months on, the people of Gaza and the west bank, and of course the hostages, are in the most distressing circumstances possible. I will not comment from the Dispatch Box on sanctions, as she would expect, but I can assure her that we will work urgently with our allies and partners on further pressure to make Israel change course.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): It is becoming increasingly difficult to keep up with the slaughter in Gaza, the brutality and cruelty on the west bank, and starvation as a policy. The crimes come daily, such as the recent killing of Mohammed Bardawil, one of only three key eyewitnesses to the slaughter of rescue workers just a few weeks ago, whose bodies were buried in shallow graves. It is clear to everybody that crimes are being committed daily.

As a number of Members have pointed out, the UK is a party to international agreements that provide a positive obligation to act to prevent genocide and torture and protect the rights of others. We have an obligation, as a member of the United Nations Security Council and a state party to the Geneva conventions, to promote peace and security. What advice has the Minister taken on the liability that will attach to him as a decision maker? Have the Government received advice on whether the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, any senior officials or previous Ministers may be exposed when the reckoning comes?

Mr Falconer: As Members would expect, I will not discuss internal legal advice in the Chamber, whether it applies to me or other Ministers. I reassure the right hon. Gentleman that, right across Government, we understand the gravity of the situation and the weight that falls on us to ensure changes to this diabolical trajectory. We will continue to use our role in the Security Council, the G7 and the E3, as we did yesterday, and that action will not stop.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The Minister still refuses to address the central issue, which is that our obligation to prevent genocide under the Rome statute has already been triggered by the ample evidence of Israeli war crimes in Gaza. In the week marking 77 years since the Nakba, how many more times will he come to the Chamber with just words—words that do nothing? We need action. Let us be clear: it is not a case of if but when he will end the UK's complicity in arming a state that is accused of genocide against the Palestinians, and of when he will finally impose sanctions on Israel. History will judge his delay.

Mr Falconer: I remind the House of the decisions that we took last year. We have discussed the question of the F-35 global spares pool. The basis on which we made a carve-out is clear and has been debated many times. Let me be clear: aside from that carve-out, when we came into government, we took on the solemn duty of making an assessment, which did not appear to have been made, of the serious risk of potential breaches of international humanitarian law. We then suspended arms export licences where those weapons could be used in such conduct—that means in Gaza, on the west bank, and in relation to all the areas where those risks accrued. We took far-reaching action. That action is still in place, and we continue to conduct those assessments.

I can understand why many Members may feel frustrated by the F-35 carve-out. Perhaps they also feel frustrated about our continuing to sell arms that do not risk a violation, according to the assessment that has been much discussed here. We think it right that we, for example, continue to provide body armour that might be used by non-governmental organisations in Gaza, or provide parts of the supply chain that could end up in the hands of NATO allies. We have taken far-reaching action on arms. That is important work that we are proud of.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): I have just returned from the High Court this morning, where Government lawyers will argue, in defending the continued supply of F-35 components, that the evidence available does not support a finding of genocide, and that there is a "tenable view that no genocide has occurred or is occurring".

[Brendan O'Hara]

It appears that the Government—whether they have told the Minister so or not—have already made a determination, and that explains why they have no intention of asking for an independent assessment of whether a genocide is likely. The Government know that if they did ask for one, it would reveal an unpalatable truth that would prevent them from supplying Israel with the weapons that it needs to continue its merciless onslaught. It really is as grubby as that, isn't it, Minister?

Mr Falconer: It is not as grubby as that. First, we will not litigate an ongoing legal case in the Chamber, as Members would expect. A judicial review on the F-35 element is happening over these days. The judge will find on that, and we will respect the judgment. Let me be absolutely clear to the hon. Gentleman: we continue to conduct assessments across a full range of responsibilities under international law. It is simply not true to suggest that we are avoiding making any internal assessment in order to justify policy. We continue to assess these things carefully. We do it on a rolling basis, regularly. What he says is simply not true.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his personal commitment to this cause, and the UK Government for putting this matter on the record at the UN yesterday as a matter of extreme urgency. May I also put to the Minister directly the challenge yesterday from Tom Fletcher, the UN's aid chief? He said:

"For those killed and those whose voices are silenced: what more evidence do you need now?...Will you act—decisively—to prevent genocide?"

What is the Minister's answer to that question?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend has been committed to these issues since before he came to this place. Tom Fletcher's words are important. As I said earlier, he is the most senior member of the humanitarian community in the world, and what he said at yesterday's meeting, which we called, is very important. We have not waited for yesterday's meeting, or for the determination of international courts, to take action. Let us not forget what we have done in relation to UNRWA, on arms suspension, on sanctions on Israeli settlers, or through our convening role on the United Nations Security Council. We will continue to take action. Mr Fletcher rightly asks for "decisive" action. Has our action yet been decisive? Clearly it has not. Hostages remain detained, Palestinians continue to suffer, and a two-state solution feels very distant indeed. We have not yet had the decisive effect that we would wish to see, and we will continue to act until we do.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): As well as raping, kidnapping and killing civilians on 7 October for the sake of it, Hamas had a strategy: to try to prevent further peace deals between Israel and its Arab neighbours by provoking a massive, frenzied reaction to the atrocities. Does the Minister share my dismay that this brutal strategy seems to be succeeding?

Mr Falconer: I share the right hon. Gentleman's dismay that events in the region since the horrific actions of 7 October have involved an enormous amount of

bloodshed and civilian suffering. This Government hope that we will yet see a day when the region is stable, when there are normal diplomatic relations between all its members, and when there is a two-state solution, with the two states living securely and safely side by side. I regret that it feels such a distant prospect.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Seventy-seven years since the Nakba, Israel's illegal occupation eats away at the land. We now have—I will repeat these words loud and clear—"plausible genocide" according to the International Court of Justice, the International Criminal Court, Amnesty International and the United Nations. Given this week's news, what new assessments have been made, and how often, to determine what other actions we can take to stop what is happening to the Gazans—the children, the civilians, and the aid workers—and to make sure that we can get aid in? What other pressures and levers can the Government use, including as part of a bloc, together with international partners and others, in addition to recognising Palestine? Surely that recognition is long overdue.

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend asks important questions about assessments. Those are made regularly, on a rolling basis, and in the light of new events. I reassure her that we do not wait for assessments or final legal determinations before taking action. I have listed some of that action already, and I reassure her that we will work urgently with our allies and partners on further pressure to make Israel change course.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Even if the Minister cannot condemn what is obviously an act of genocide, will he tell us in clear terms whether we are still supplying parts for F-35 jets that find their way to Israel and take part in the bombardment of Gaza? Are there still flights going from RAF Akrotiri over to Israel that are carrying military equipment that can be used either to bomb Gaza or to undertake military action against the people of the west bank?

Mr Falconer: The decisions that we take on arms bind every part of the UK Government. We are a Government committed to abiding by our international legal obligations, and we will continue to do so. Let me be clear, again, on the position on F-35s. The F-35 sales directly to Israel, whether in relation to any particular component, have been suspended. Sales to a global pool, which are necessary for the continued function of the global F-35 programme, have not been suspended. Where sales go to a global pool, it is clearly possible that they could find a final destination in Israel, but to suspend our provision of components to the F-35 global pool would, in effect, render the F-35 programme inoperable. It is on that basis that we set out the decisions that we took in September.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): May I put on record the relief that I and many others feel about the release of Edan Alexander? I am saying a prayer for the other hostages.

Every week that we come back to this House the horror is greater. Many of us woke up this morning to a spokesperson for the Israeli Government on the "Today" programme denying that there is hunger in Gaza at all. This House knows the reality: we are 10 weeks into a

blockade of aid by the Israeli Government, and one in five are starving. The Minister will know that Tom Fletcher spoke passionately and with purpose yesterday at the UN about the collective failure of the UN to speak out previously. How do we avoid that this time? What more evidence do we need before we take action, and what more action can be done?

Mr Falconer: As I said earlier, the words of Tom Fletcher in the United Nations Security Council are important. The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification assessment that was produced on Monday—that assessment is authoritative and thorough in its production—is the most important indication of needs in Gaza. It should be taken seriously by everyone in this Chamber, and indeed by the Israeli Government. My hon. Friend has long been committed to these issues, and he knows the actions that we have taken so far. I will not speculate from the Dispatch Box, other than to reassure the House that we will be working urgently with our allies and partners to ensure that Israel changes course.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): There can be few now who would believe that the conduct of the Netanyahu Government is anything other than gross and disproportionate. However, does the Minister agree with me that the actor in the region that has unequivocally embarked on genocide is Hamas, with their self-avowed policy of killing Jews and eradicating the state of Israel?

Mr Falconer: I have condemned Hamas for their despicable actions and ugly and unacceptable rhetoric many times from this Dispatch Box, and I am happy to do so again. It is the events of 7 October, in all their full horror, that triggered this most recent, most horrific round of violence.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): In addition to calling for the release of all hostages, Tom Fletcher, the UN emergency relief co-ordinator, asked last night what action we will tell future generations that we each took

“to stop the 21st century atrocity to which we bear daily witness in Gaza.”

What action will the Government take if, in the next 24 hours, Israel does not allow aid into Gaza?

Mr Falconer: As I have said throughout the course of the afternoon, the responsibilities weigh heavily on all of us. We do not view the situation as acceptable, and we will continue to take steps with our allies and partners to urge Israel to change course.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): As we meet here, in this rather grand Palace of Westminster, the reality on the ground is that Palestinian children continue to die in the rubble. Is it not becoming clear that the central policy of the Israeli Government seems more about protecting the political skin and life of the current Israeli Prime Minister than even saving the lives of the remaining Israeli hostages and saving the lives of Palestinians? I appeal to the British Government to be again on the right side of history, of the law and of moral judgment, and not to back one particular individual, fighting for his political life, back in Tel Aviv.

Mr Falconer: The right hon. Gentleman speaks powerfully about the various views in Israel. I will not speculate on the decision making of others, but I listen very carefully to the words of the Israeli hostages themselves when they have been released, what they make of the circumstances in Israel and what policy they think should be adopted. Those are important voices and they echo loudly, both in this Chamber and across the world. We are clear that, whatever the intentions, the international obligations under law on the Israeli Government in relation to Gaza are indisputable, and we call today, as we have called every day, for them to abide by them.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): I declare an interest as the secretary of the National Union of Journalists parliamentary group.

It is the anniversary of the murder by Israeli forces of Shireen Abu Akleh, the renowned journalist. Alongside her on that day was another journalist, Ali Samoudi, who was shot in the back. Two weeks ago, the Israeli forces arrested him and dragged him from his home, and Ali is now in detention somewhere, but we do not know where. Under international law, journalists are afforded special protection. Will the Minister immediately take up with the Israeli Government the question of where Ali Samoudi is and seek to do everything we can do to secure his release? He works for CNN, Reuters and Al Jazeera, and all he was doing was simply reporting on some of the war crimes that are taking place.

Mr Falconer: My right hon. Friend raises incredibly important points about journalists and I am happy to take up the case in question. Not just journalists but a whole set of people are afforded special protections under international law, including medical professionals and aid workers, many of whom we have seen involved in terrible incidents in Gaza. We have been pressing for accountability and justice on those questions; I think in particular of the three British nationals killed in the World Central Kitchen incident more than a year ago, for whom we are still waiting for justice.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Does the Minister accept that, where *prima facie* evidence of genocide exists, awaiting for the determination to be made formally by a court is not sufficient for us to meet the duty to prevent under the genocide convention?

Mr Falconer: In this case, the International Court of Justice is clearly the correct authority. It has issued a set of provisional measures, which we support.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Wyre) (Lab): Civilians are starving to death in Gaza. Aid has been held for 10 weeks and used as a weapon against innocent civilians. My constituents are rightly outraged by what they are seeing, and so am I. While I welcome the Minister's words, what further actions can the Government take to send a clearer message to Israel that this absolutely has to stop? Will the Minister look again at sanctions? Will he look at arms export licences? And will he recognise the state of Palestine?

Mr Falconer: I know my hon. Friend's constituents will be concerned, just as my constituents in Lincoln and those across the whole country are concerned. I saw

[Mr Falconer]

the situation with my own eyes when I went to al-Arish, where British aid was languishing while people desperately required it in Gaza. I saw the restrictions that were preventing aid getting in. I can assure her and her constituents that I have raised this personally in every way that I have thought I am able to do so, to try and make progress, and we will continue to do so. It is a source of continued personal frustration to me, and frustration to the Government, that we have not been able to get aid back into Gaza in accordance with international law.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Does the Minister have any information about how much aid is being held in Hamas-controlled warehouses in Gaza? Is the key to this desperate situation our links to Tehran? At the end of the day, the Iranian regime pulls the strings of its puppet organisation, Hamas, who are holding the hostages in conditions akin to torture.

Mr Falconer: We take serious steps to ensure that Hamas do not get access to aid. We supported a review into the function of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. In his remarks yesterday, Mr Fletcher set out his view on the robustness of the United Nations provisions to try to prevent Hamas from stockpiling aid. The findings of the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification report on Monday about the circumstances in which Palestinian civilians are trying to live in Gaza make for sobering reading. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that Iran's malign role in the region must stop. It has supported Hamas, who have brought nothing but pain and misery, not just to Israelis but to Palestinians as well.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): Last week, in response to a question I asked, the Minister said:

"Forcible movement of the Gazan population out of Gaza would be forcible displacement".—[*Official Report*, 6 May 2025; Vol. 766, c. 588.]

Forcible displacement is a war crime; it is already happening and it is about to accelerate. Will he say in turn, as the head of UNRWA said this week and as the former Israeli Defence Minister, Moshe Ya'alon, said last week, that Israel is committing war crimes in Gaza?

Mr Falconer: I will resist my hon. Friend, who is not just a doughty advocate for the Palestinian people but a respected lawyer. As he would expect, I am not going to take the opportunity to make a determination at the Dispatch Box, but I will be clear again that forcible displacement is clearly prohibited by international law, and we are clear on that at all times.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): Amnesty International has described the two-month siege in Gaza as "genocide in action". According to experts, Israel is deliberately creating conditions that could lead to the physical destruction of the Palestinian people, a pattern many argue amounts to genocide. As a signatory to the genocide convention, does the Minister agree that the UK has a legal duty to act when there is a risk of genocide, and that the duty to prevent begins not when genocide is confirmed, proven or established, but when

there is a reasonable suspicion that it is occurring? The alarms are flashing red and the warning signs are there for the Government to act. Will they act?

Mr Falconer: I have set out the process of determination, the provisional measures that have been issued by the ICJ and the Government's determination not to wait until cases are concluded but to take action now to try to preserve life.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley) (Lab): Israel is intentionally starving Palestinians and action should be taken to stop the war crimes and genocide. Those are the words of a leading United Nations expert on the right to food. Will the Minister tell us what is preventing the Government from imposing sanctions on Israel? What are they scared of? If we cannot discuss this from the Dispatch Box, we certainly cannot discuss it behind closed doors.

Mr Falconer: The House has heard me talk about sanctions in the same terms over a long period of time. I understand my hon. Friend's frustration about my not being able to speculate from the Dispatch Box about the sanctions we might take, but to do so would reduce their effectiveness and frustrate the will of the House. We keep all of these matters under close review. We are not scared in the performance of our duties. We are working all the time to try practically to change the situation on the ground, and that is to what all our efforts are directed.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Barely a day goes by when I do not receive impassioned pleas from my constituents begging for actions, not words, from this Government. Many have shared their distress that we celebrated the defeat of tyranny on VE Day at the same time that the people of Gaza starved and were being bombed to oblivion. They say that we are complicit in genocide. What does the Minister say to my constituents? I agree with them, but I feel powerless to do any more than come to this House every time and say the same thing.

Mr Falconer: Deeds, not words. We are restoring funding to UNRWA, suspending arms licences and giving £129 million in humanitarian assistance to the Occupied Palestinian Territories. We have continued work at the UN Security Council and in relation to international courts. I recognise the frustration of the House, and I do not in any way wish to weigh misery between the many, many people still in Gaza or the west bank facing real hardship at this moment, but the action of this Government has made a real difference to Palestinian lives—I have seen it with my own eyes. There are people who are in safety now because of the UK Government, and we will continue to do what we can. I accept that there is more to do, but our actions do have impact.

Ruth Jones (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): I thank the Minister for outlining the horrors being inflicted on the people of Gaza so clearly yet again, but we have heard words from the Dispatch Box many times in support of the Palestinians before. He talks about court proceedings, but they take months, if not years, to complete. Men, women and children are dying every

hour from hunger, disease and bombs in Gaza at the moment. They cannot wait. What is the Minister doing? We need action, not words.

Mr Falconer: I have outlined some of the action, but I reassure my hon. Friend that we are not waiting for legal determinations, not least because the ICJ has issued provisional measures, and because it is the policy of this Government that we are acting now to try to improve the lot of Palestinians.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): One thing we can all agree on is that we want to see the safe release of the hostages. It is evident that military action, in and of itself, was never going to achieve that. With that in mind, do the Government support or condemn Israel for the most recent escalation of military action? If they are not prepared to condemn it at this stage, how many more innocent deaths must there be before they do?

Mr Falconer: The hon. Gentleman refers to the hostages. Some of the released hostages have made this argument with the greatest force, and they are important words. Let me say concretely and clearly that the British Government oppose the return to war in Gaza by the Israeli Government; we oppose the most recent escalation.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I am sure that I am not the only Member of this House who is getting increasingly frustrated by the number of discussions that we have where we say the same things over and over again while the horrific situation for the Palestinian people in Gaza worsens day by day. Does the Minister agree that for us to send a clear message to Israel, we need to do three things: suspend all arms licences to Israel, including the F-35 licences; impose sanctions against Israel; and recognise the state of Palestine?

Mr Falconer: The House has heard me speak of my frustration on a number of occasions—I share that with my hon. Friend. I think I have addressed the three substantive points that he raises already in this session.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): You're the Minister!

Mr Falconer: I am the Minister; these responsibilities weigh particularly heavily on me. I am not blind to the IPC or to Tom Fletcher's testimony at a session that we called. Do hon. Members think that I am unaware of the horrors being meted out to people in Gaza? I am not unaware: I am taking every action that I can, as are other Ministers. It is an intolerable situation, as hon. Members heard from the Prime Minister earlier, and we are lifting every effort to try to change it.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Nobody wants war, but we must reflect that this is a war. It is a war between our ally Israel and the aggressor, Hamas. It was Hamas who brutally murdered, mutilated and raped innocent Israeli citizens. It is Hamas who still keep 58 hostages under lock and key. It is Hamas who, in their own charter, have genocidal intent, calling for the wiping out of Israel and the killing of Jews. Will the Minister at least accept that those people who wish to call those trying to defend their own citizens genocidal are playing into the hands of the terrorists themselves,

who will continue to use their own citizens as human shields and give no pathway to peace?

Mr Falconer: I condemn Hamas and their actions entirely. Israel is an ally, but we say to all our allies that international humanitarian law is a binding framework for us all. When it is breached in one place, the breach echoes around the world. That is why we have been so clear on these questions throughout.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I am sick and tired of coming back to this Chamber, asking the same questions and getting the same answers, when war crime after war crime is being committed and a genocide is taking place. It is a sick joke to believe that it is right—which it is—to impose sanctions on Russia for its unlawful invasion of Ukraine, but that tut-tutting at Benjamin Netanyahu and telling everyone “We think this is really bad” somehow cuts the mustard: it does not. Words are not enough to stop war crimes. We need more than words and more than actions. Can the Minister advise this House how many more Gazans need to be killed, injured and starved by Israel until the Government do the right thing and bring widespread sanctions in, like they did with Russia? People think that we are scared and that this is a double standard.

Mr Falconer: We have taken action, as I have described this afternoon. I have already assured the House that it is certainly not fear that shapes our actions. I am always happy to return to this Dispatch Box to answer questions from parliamentarians about this question, but I do not want to give the House the impression that that is all I do. When I am not in this House, I am working on these tasks with urgency. I have listed some of the actions that we have taken since I became the Minister. I will continue to work on these questions and to return to the House to answer Members' questions.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Over the last 18 months, Israel has facilitated 1.7 million tonnes of aid going into Gaza. Very sadly, much of that aid has ended up in warehouses and trucks have been raided by Hamas operatives. The aid has failed to get into the hands of the people who desperately need it. We now have a position whereby the blockade has continued. Will the Minister come up with a credible plan to get the aid in, require the Israel Defence Forces to facilitate the aid going to the people who desperately need it, and prevent Hamas and other terrorists from capturing the aid and preventing the people of Gaza from gaining the aid that they desperately need?

Mr Falconer: Where Hamas have interfered with aid deliveries, I condemn that utterly. We have to be clear that considerable amounts of aid were not allowed into Gaza, even before this most recent blockade, which is now ensuring that nowhere near the scale of aid required is getting in. As I think the hon. Member is alluding to, there are proposals for other methods of getting it in. We would support proposals to get aid into Gaza, provided that they are in accordance with humanitarian principles, which are vital in every conflict zone around the world. The UN emergency relief co-ordinator yesterday set out his views on how those principles need to be adhered to.

Rachael Maskell: UK manufacturers of F-35 components can place GPS markers on every single component, and the UK Government can ensure that every component that is exported has a GPS marker on it, so what is the Government's excuse for continuing with their programme on F-35s when they can distinguish the destination of every single component?

Mr Falconer: I have set out the position on F-35s and the manner in which the global spares pool works. That is information provided by the experts who are responsible; I understand that some hon. Members may disagree with those facts. The discussion is happening in a judicial review this week, and I will not get ahead of that process.

Mr Tom Morrison (Cheadle) (LD): One in five people in Gaza are facing starvation, 90% of people are now displaced, over 50,000 people are dead, and Gaza is the most dangerous place on earth for humanitarian workers. This has to end. The Government keep on condemning Netanyahu, but he does not listen. The time for words has to stop—we need action. Will the Minister take this opportunity to commit to sanctioning extremist members of the Israeli Cabinet, suspending all arms trade with the Israeli Government and recognising a Palestinian state?

Mr Falconer: Those three points have already been put to me over the course of the afternoon, so I will not repeat my answers, and I will not speculate on further sanctions. However, as the hon. Gentleman references sanctions on settlers, I will point out that we have taken far-reaching sanctions on settlers. We oppose the violent expansion of settlements in the occupied territories, which are illegal under international law, and we will continue to do so.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his often candid comments in this Chamber, but we will continue to come here and ask questions, since our constituents continue to be horrified—as we are—by the devastation that is playing out in Gaza. The UN has stated that action must be taken now to prevent genocide, so does the Minister understand that when our constituents hear a legal response, they remain so frustrated, and that they want to see tangible action?

Mr Falconer: I do understand the frustration of constituents; as I said earlier, that frustration is shared in Lincoln and across the country. Everybody in this House and everybody across the country wants to see an end to the awful scenes on our television screens.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): The Minister has stated that the legality of the UK's F-35 exports is currently being tested in the courts. In the High Court, the Government have made submissions that

“No evidence has been seen that Israel is deliberately targeting civilian women or children”,
and that there is

“also evidence of Israel making efforts to limit incidental harm to civilians.”

If the Government need to be shown evidence that Israel is deliberately targeting civilians, I suggest the Minister and his colleagues review the footage captured by the BBC of yesterday's bombing of Gaza's European hospital, the footage emerging from the Nasser hospital, the millions of hours of livestreamed footage available since 7 October, or the thousands of reports and articles published since. The past 18 months have seen a total war on all of Gaza, with acts of ethnic cleansing and extermination, according to the UN. Does the UK deny the existence of that evidence, and if so, have the Government committed perjury?

Mr Falconer: It is obviously inappropriate to try to rehearse submissions that are currently being heard by the court.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister knows this, but we should put on record that when President Netanyahu says there is “no way” he will stop his onslaught in Gaza, he does not do so with the consent of the hostage families, or indeed of the majority of people in Israel. Even President Trump is now avoiding him. My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi) is right: we have obligations too. I hear the Minister's frustration, and I think that across this House we want to give him strength so that he can go further. He will have heard the calls for sanctions and reports to international criminal courts. Will he give us a vote in this place about immediately recognising Palestine, as we had in 2014, so that we can strengthen his negotiations with Israel and send a clear message that what is happening in Gaza is wrong and must stop?

Mr Falconer: I know that my hon. Friend has an incredibly brave and courageous constituent who is herself a member of a hostage family. Whenever I have seen her, her words ring in my ears, as do those of other hostage families, and I know they do so across the world. They are important views expressed by those who are most directly affected by the horrors of 7 October and all that followed.

I have already rehearsed some of the arguments in relation to recognition.

Jack Rankin (Windsor) (Con): I thank the Minister for his clarity that genocide is a legal test of whether a crime has been committed

“with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group”.

That is exactly what the Hamas terrorist group state in their foundational charter: the intent to destroy Israel and Jews worldwide, as they actively sought to do on 7 October. If they wanted to end the war, Hamas would release the 58 hostages they continue to hold. How is the Minister supporting our friend and ally, the democracy Israel, in its fight against this genocidal terrorist group?

Mr Falconer: I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the horrors of what Hamas have done, and the ugly and unacceptable rhetoric they have often employed, not just towards Israelis but towards Jews everywhere, and I recognise the anxiety in this country about the rise in antisemitic rhetoric ever since 7 October. As I said earlier, Israel is our ally, and we have stood with her

when she faces legitimate security threats. We have always urged her, as a friend, to abide by international humanitarian law. Where there is a risk that she does not, we make that clear, as we have discussed over the course of this afternoon.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I preface my question by saying that no Member of this House should doubt the dedication and compassion with which the Minister fulfils his duties. Over the past few days, the World Health Organisation has warned that Gazans face intergenerational scarring as a result of hunger in the territory. The WHO quoted figures produced by the Gazan Health Ministry, which held that 55 children have died as a result of malnutrition. What assessment do the UK Government make of the extent of malnutrition in Gaza and the number of deaths attributable to starvation as a result of Israel's refusal to allow aid to enter the strip?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend asks important questions, and I know that he follows these issues closely. The most up-to-date and authoritative assessment of those questions is Monday's IPC assessment. We are considering it in detail—its findings are appalling. We are not yet able to fully delineate the link between aid restrictions and those findings in the level of detail that my hon. Friend has described, but the connection is obvious.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I am looking to finish this urgent question at around 2 o'clock, so I would appreciate it if Members kept their questions pithy and the Minister kept his answers pithy, as would the rest of the House.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): I have recently returned from a visit to the Occupied Palestinian Territories with the hon. Member for Leicester South (Shokat Adam). We were expecting an appalling situation, but it was far, far worse. Israeli Ministers are gleefully calling for the bombing of food warehouses because they believe it will help bring victory—in their eyes. It is clear that Israeli hostages are being used as a pretext to continue the slaughter and starvation in Gaza.

Although I recognise the Minister's sincere compassion in the way he has expressed himself on this issue, it is clear that he comes to this Chamber with a straitjacket around him. What we need here is the Prime Minister, who can make the decisions; otherwise, we are not going to see any action on arms supplies, on trade or in any other area, including recognition of the state of Palestine. If the Minister cannot do those things, can he at least recognise the right of Palestinians to statehood?

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

Mr Falconer: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman was able to travel; as I have said before from the Dispatch Box, I recognise the importance of Members from across the House seeing these situations up close and being able to form their own judgments. I am the relevant Minister, and I speak with the authority of the Government.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The Minister, who is a good man, recognises that the 70-day aid blockade has made starvation widespread in Gaza. During the recess, I was on a delegation with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). We were nearby in Egypt, and we heard real fears that annexation of both Gaza and the west bank is near-inevitable. The Minister has told us what steps he has taken up until now, but there has been a clear escalation, so can he please give us some hope that there are further levers that can be pulled? We do not want to be on the wrong side of history.

Mr Falconer: I will not speculate about further actions, but I recognise, as I did in my previous answer, how welcome it is that my hon. Friend has travelled to the region. Egypt is an important partner for the UK on this question. I saw the vital role that it is playing in supporting healthcare for injured Palestinian children. I saw injured Palestinian children myself in al-Arish hospital, and I was pleased while I was there to announce a £1 million UK contribution to ensure that Palestinian civilians displaced into Egypt get the help and healthcare that they need.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The UN says that Israel's denial of aid is evidence of "the systematic dismantling of Palestinian life".

There is therefore a risk that we are witnesses to genocide. The Minister's Government can reinstate airlifts of aid along the lines of those arranged last year, which would send a powerful message. Will the Minister act now and enable aid airlifts?

Mr Falconer: We have supported airlifts in the past, as I am sure the right hon. Lady knows, and we were glad to work with our Jordanian partners on that question. I have to be straightforward with the House: given the scale of need in Gaza, we should not be displaced from the central question, which is ensuring that the road crossings open. That is the only way to get aid in at the scale required.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Things should have been clear at the outset when Yoav Gallant, the former Israeli Defence Minister, said that Israel will "eliminate everything". Some 18 months and 52,000 deaths later, Israel Katz, also a Defence Minister in Israel, stated that blocking aid was being used to "pressure" Hamas, making starvation an openly stated Israeli weapon of war. Elimination, eradication or genocide—as Tom Fletcher said, can this Government now urgently act to prevent it?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend asks important questions, and I have been clear from this Dispatch Box, and I am clear again, that aid must not be used as a pressure tool, it must not be used as political leverage and it must not be used as a military tactic.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): We have had truly shocking statements in this Chamber. The Foreign Secretary suggested that not enough Palestinians had been killed for it to constitute a genocide. The Prime Minister stated that although he understood the definition of genocide, he did not refer to it as a genocide. The Minister repeats that it is a matter for the International Court of Justice. If that is the case, why

[Ayoub Khan]

are Government lawyers advancing submissions that no genocide has been conducted when it comes to the sale of F-35 parts?

Mr Falconer: As I have said, I am not going to try to litigate the submissions of the court case on the questions that we have described. I have addressed the issues repeatedly in this House. I have always been clear that we would defend that case, and that is what we are doing, and we will see the judgment of the judges.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): Currently, 4,000 newborns in Gaza are unable to access essential lifesaving care due to the destruction of medical facilities. Severe malnutrition and the death of critically ill children is now a daily reality. In the light of the ongoing suffering of children, does the Minister agree that it is time for the UK to go further in its actions and find alternative ways to get critical medicines into Gaza, protect those vulnerable children and ensure humanitarian access into Gaza? Will he consider alternative routes for those children who desperately need critical care?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend is committed to these questions. I responded to an earlier question by emphasising the central importance of road routes in ensuring aid of the scale required. However, I assure the House that we continue to look at what alternatives we can find to help where we can. That has included supporting a small number of Gazan children to get access to specialist healthcare here in the UK, which they are currently accessing. Where we can help, we will help, but I must be honest with the House about the scale of aid that is required if the IPC findings of Monday are to be averted.

Shokat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Three weeks ago, while I was in the west bank, I spoke to a young Palestinian refugee mother who asked me, with tears in her eyes, “Why has the world forgotten us?” My response then has been echoed today: the world has not forgotten them, but what we have done is fail them completely. The failure looks like this: the United Nations has now confirmed that since March, more than 100 children every single day have been killed or injured. Imagine if it was our children. If, God forbid, 100 European children or 100 Israeli children were being killed every single day, would we be supplying even a penknife to the perpetrators of the crime—yes or no?

Mr Falconer: The death of any child is a tragedy. I have set out already the steps that we have taken in relation to arms suspensions. I reassure those watching not from the UK, as I reassured the Jordanian MPs whom I saw this morning, that nobody has forgotten about Gaza—not in this House, and not in this country. It will continue to be an issue of first-rank importance for this Government, and I will continue to work every day to try to see the changes we have described this afternoon.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Lab): The Minister has touched on the UK Government supplying the global pool of components for F-35 jets for international security and peace. Considering that we are seeing the live-streaming of a genocide against the Palestinian

people—F-35s are a crucial part of that, and are being used to bomb civilian camps and hospitals—are the Government considering whether Israel, given its actions, should be part of that global pool?

Mr Falconer: I do not wish to seem evasive, but when these questions are being determined in the court this week, I do not want to get ahead of those submissions and those discussions.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Some thanks should be given to the Minister for his temperament, his well-chosen words and his reaction to all the questions. He has shown incredible patience, and we all admire him for that. Undoubtedly, there are innocent people who are suffering and have been suffering since Hamas’s genocidal attacks on 7 October. The suffering of Israeli and Palestinian children means that we must find a way forward to secure peace, so how does the Minister believe we can further push for the aim of peace and make the welfare of the children in this region—the innocents—a priority?

Mr Falconer: The hon. Gentleman is unfailing in his courtesy, and I am grateful for it again this afternoon. He asks the vital, central question: how can we return to a diplomatic process that provides for security and stability in the region? It must be in accordance with the Arab reconstruction plan, with no place for Hamas in the future, an immediate release of hostages, an immediate return of aid and a return to a diplomatic process that can provide for security and stability for two states side by side.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): My constituents write to me on an almost daily basis, horrified by the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding before our very eyes. The denial of aid to innocent Palestinians is not only intolerable, but unconscionable. My hon. Friend was right earlier when he talked about deeds, not words, so what does further pressure on Israel look like? What practical measures will our Government take to prevent genocide, in line with our international legal obligations?

Mr Falconer: I can reassure my hon. Friend and her constituents in Paisley that we discuss these matters urgently with our friends and allies, and we will always abide by our international legal obligations, including those she mentions.

Paula Barker (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): Given the genocide we are witnessing unfold before our eyes every single day, will the Government drop the 2030 road map for UK-Israel bilateral relations and impose economic and diplomatic sanctions to apply pressure on Israel to abide by its obligations under international law?

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for her continued engagement in these questions. As you would expect, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am afraid that I will not be speculating on further sanctions from the Dispatch Box this afternoon.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I acknowledge the dedication of my hon. Friend and British diplomats in this regard, but my constituents are deeply concerned. Does he

agree that the Israeli Security Cabinet's recent plans are completely unacceptable? Its aid blockade is also totally unconscionable. We must make plain to this Israeli Government that we and the international community will not tolerate this, and that as in other theatres of conflict, we will consider all practical steps, including military aid drops, to get aid through to those who need it.

Mr Falconer: I recognise the concern that my hon. Friend's constituents will be feeling, but I can reassure him that we are considering all measures to try to ensure that aid gets into Gaza. I regret that there is no alternative to road access, given the scale of the aid required, but we will continue to work on these questions with the urgency that he has described. I am grateful for his words about British diplomats. Let me reassure the House that not only the ministerial team but the diplomatic service of the United Kingdom works on these questions each and every day, includes in yesterday afternoon's session of the UN Security Council.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): The 10 long weeks since the Israeli blockade began have brought famine to the region, while food is rotting across the border and the Israeli Government are lying and denying the scale of the atrocities. Israel's Defence Minister, Israel Katz, has been quoted as saying that the blockade is a "main pressure lever" to secure victory. When will the UK Government, as a member of the UN Security Council, impose meaningful sanctions to stop the genocide that we are seeing?

Mr Falconer: We have covered sanctions and determinations, but I can reassure my hon. Friend that we consider our position on the Security Council to be an important responsibility, which is why we called the meeting yesterday that has led to so much of the discussion this afternoon.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): In the scenes and pictures that we are seeing, many of our constituents are looking for family members. One such family member is Dr Radi, who is stuck in north Gaza and is very ill and frail, and whose son and daughter-in-law are important NHS doctors in my constituency. What are we doing to ensure that there is a way for people who need care and are stuck in Gaza to come out, and to be cared for by family members here?

Mr Falconer: It is a top priority for me, and for my officials, to ensure that British nationals or their dependants who are in danger in Gaza are able to leave safely. I do not wish to comment on the specifics, but I am happy to take up that case and others with my hon. Friend and any other Members whose constituents are in similar circumstances.

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): I, too, thank the Minister for all his work on this issue. Given the UK's commitment to a two-state solution, and given our obligations under international law, can he explain how the Government justify engaging in trade negotiations with Israel while the UN is warning us about genocide in Gaza, and does he agree that pursuing a trade deal in these circumstances would undermine

both our ability to broker a two-state solution and our positive obligation to act to prevent violations of international law?

Mr Falconer: I can assure the House that my focus is on the matters that we have discussed this afternoon. They are urgent and immediate, and they crowd out all other priorities.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): The truth is that there is no need for any organisation to tell the public that what is happening is genocide. After all, we have seen the attempted extermination of the Palestinian people televised live for over a year now. I put it to the Minister that this Government will be remembered as having been complicit in, and accomplices to, the war crime being committed by Israel. What actually has to happen before our Government will take meaningful action in the name of humanity and decency?

Mr Falconer: On the very first day I became a Minister, we restored funding to UNRWA, and within weeks we had taken the far-reaching actions that I have described in relation to arms sales. I understand the force of the question, and I understand the feeling of our constituents throughout the country, in my constituency of Lincoln and elsewhere, but let us not pretend that this Government have taken the same steps as the previous Government. We took a series of steps, and we took them quickly and decisively.

I am not suggesting to the hon. Member that what we have done is enough—no one could hear this discussion and think it is enough; no one could have listened to the UN Security Council yesterday afternoon and think it is enough. But there is a difference between saying that there is more to be done and saying that nothing has been done.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): After 70 days of aid being blockaded, we are watching an entirely preventable famine unfold in real time in Gaza. Meanwhile, the Israeli Government's anti-NGO Bill seeks to restrict the ability of lifesaving humanitarians to operate, and instead militarises aid delivery in violation of international humanitarian law. I thank the Minister for all his efforts and for his challenge on this point, but will he continue to challenge the Israeli Government on it, and does he agree that there has to be accountability?

Mr Falconer: I am familiar with the draft legislation in the Knesset, and we are engaging on the questions it raises.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for all his work—it must sometimes feel very lonely on that Front Bench—and particularly welcome the urgent session that we managed to secure at the United Nations, but things have become more difficult in recent days, and we must ask whether we are doing enough with our allies on a number of fronts, particularly recognition. A private letter has been sent by dozens of my colleagues on this side of the House, and there is unity on both sides of the House in favour of recognition of the state of Palestine, action on sanctions for Ben-Gvir and Smotrich, and on the violent settlements. Above all, can we please rule out a trade deal?

Mr Falconer: I am genuinely grateful to all Members across the House who ask me questions and seek me out across the Palace to convey the force of their views on this. I have seen the letter to which my hon. Friend has referred, and I recognise, given the strength of feeling in all parts of the House, that I will be returning here almost daily. We will continue to work on the issues that my hon. Friend has outlined. I will not rehearse answers to her substantive policy questions, but I assure her that I will continue to engage with those on the Government Benches and others on the important questions that are being raised.

Ministerial Code: Compliance

2.6 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Leader of the House if she will make a statement on Government compliance with the general principles set out in paragraph 9.1 of the ministerial code.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): The ministerial code is clear:

“When Parliament is in session, the most important announcements of government policy should be made in the first instance in Parliament.”

That is an important principle by which this Government stand. Already in this Session there have been 146 oral statements in just 133 sitting days—more than one per day, and more than the previous Government made in the entirety of their last Session. They have included six important statements from the Prime Minister and more than 20 from the Foreign Office, as well as statements on very important issues such as today’s statement on infected blood.

The Government and I take our obligations to Parliament very seriously, and the Prime Minister and I remind Cabinet colleagues of that regularly. There are also other ways by which the Government keep the House updated, including written ministerial statements—of which there have been 633 so far in this Session—responses and appearances before Select Committees, and thousands of responses to parliamentary questions.

Although the Government remain committed to making the most important announcements on the Floor of the House, we need to balance that with other demands on the House’s time, especially when there is great interest in the other business of the day. On occasion, developments and announcements will happen when the House is not sitting, or will emerge later in the sitting day. That is why it is not always possible to make every announcement to the House first. It is also important that Members have enough time to read and digest any relevant documents, and that they are given advance notice in order to be able to question a Minister effectively and seek answers.

However, as you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, I take this aspect of the ministerial code incredibly seriously, and I will continue to work with Mr Speaker and colleagues across the House to ensure that Parliament is respected, Members are informed, the Government are scrutinised effectively, and announcements are made to this House first.

Kirsty Blackman: In recent times we have seen an increasing trend of the Government failing to make statements to the House first, despite there being no barrier to them doing so. Last Thursday was a mess, with the Minister of State for Business and Trade trying to withdraw the statement on the UK-US trade agreement, despite Members having waited here for seven hours for the statement to materialise.

The decision to abolish NHS England was relayed to the House on 13 March, having been trailed in the media beforehand. On Wednesday 12 March, an urgent question was granted on an announcement that had been made the day before on the sustainable farming incentive being cancelled. On 6 March, a consultation

on North sea energy that had been announced to the media the day before was relayed to the House in a statement. In February, the Government changed the refugee citizenship rules, and they still have not informed the House. On Monday this week, the Prime Minister announced the contents of the immigration White Paper via a speech that mirrored Enoch Powell, despite Parliament sitting later that day.

This is a consistent pattern of behaviour by the UK Government. I am concerned that there is little point in having a ministerial code if the Government can ignore one of the key principles with no sanction and apparently no consequences. The Government are nearly a year into their term, so disorganisation or a lack of familiarity with the rules can surely no longer be cited as reasons for consistent breaches of the code. I believe that the UK Government should adhere to the principles set out in the ministerial code, and that the Leader of the House must urgently set out how she intends to improve the situation and ensure that there is adherence.

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this urgent question, and I welcome the opportunity to emphasise that I take these matters very seriously. We have made a number of very big announcements to the House, often responding to world events in real time. I recognise—and I hope she will respect this—that there are judgments to be made and, at times, a balance to be struck, and I have the best interests of the House in mind.

Although the hon. Lady did not say so, there have been many times in this parliamentary Session when statements have been made to this House long before the media or anybody else were aware of them—for example, on prison capacity, increasing defence spending to 2.5% of GDP, the response to the Parliamentary Ombudsman's report into the women's state pension age, and many others. On many of those occasions, the criticism that I received was that Members did not have enough time to properly consider the details of the statements before having the opportunity to question the Minister. Hard copies of the immigration White Paper, which is a lengthy and detailed document, were made available in the Table Office at 9.30 that morning to allow Members ample time to read and consider it before questioning the Home Secretary on the Floor of the House in a session that lasted an hour and 25 minutes.

The hon. Lady raised last Thursday's statement on the US trade deal, and I think we can all recognise that that did not happen exactly as we would have liked. International events are often outside our control, and they do not take account of UK parliamentary sitting hours. The Trade Minister made an oral statement to the House as soon as he was able to do so, and I was trying to get the balance right. We wanted to make a statement when the maximum number of Members were here; otherwise, it would not have been made for several days, because it was a Thursday and the House was rising.

We are doing a lot. We are getting on with delivering on a huge number of policies, and we have signed unprecedented trade deals with other countries. The US trade deal, which is delivering lower tariffs for steel and car manufacturing, is absolutely critical, as is the India trade deal, which is delivering for Scottish distilleries and for Scotland. We are always trying to get the

balance right, and I want to emphasise my commitment to making sure that when announcements can be made to this House first, they absolutely are.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Leader of the House.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) for raising this urgent question. As she has highlighted, there is a consistent pattern of failure to report first to this House, as is required by the ministerial code. She has rightly drawn attention to the farcical scenes that we had with the Trade Minister being required to deliver a statement, then having to be UQ'd the following Monday. He tried to give the same statement, without any recognition, and was rebuked by Mr Speaker for not knowing the difference.

Back in October we had the embarrassing sight of the Chancellor announcing intended changes to the Government's fiscal rules to the media before informing Parliament, and having to be publicly rebuked by Mr Speaker for doing so. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North has mentioned a number of other cases. I would highlight the Secretary of State for Education announcing tuition fees to the press before Parliament in November, the Deputy Prime Minister announcing planning reforms before the final national planning policy framework update was publicly available, and a Ministry of Defence leak on the global combat air programme in December.

As we all know, the ministerial code—the Government took great credit for seeking to strengthen it on entering office—makes very plain what the rule is. It does not say, "Judgments are to be made." It says, "The first announcement must be made to Parliament when the most important announcements of government policy are made." It does not say, "By the way, you can prioritise these things." Does anyone seriously think that an announcement on trade, on planning, on tuition fees or on the global combat air programme would not be of the first importance to this House? No, because every single one of those would be vital.

It is not just a matter of the ministerial code and ministerial accountability. These decisions are made in breach of the Nolan principles of openness and the requirement for accountability, and they are made in breach of Labour's own manifesto promise to

"restore confidence in government and ensure ministers are held to the highest standards."

Will the right hon. Lady encourage the independent adviser to make an inquiry, and will she look to the Cabinet Secretary to do the same with civil servants? Will she and you, Madam Deputy Speaker, look to Mr Speaker for adequate enforcement of the present rules, which are being widely flouted?

Lucy Powell: I gently remind the right hon. Gentleman that the ministerial code says that

"when Parliament is in session",

announcements will be made to this House first. I also remind him that announcements can be made via written ministerial statements and other things as well. There is a balance to be struck, and we try to do that in the best interests of the House.

[Lucy Powell]

The right hon. Gentleman describes this as business question bingo. I will give him bingo: I am not going to take a lecture from him on these matters. This Government have done twice as many oral statements as his Government did in the same number of sitting days. We are ensuring that there is proper time to scrutinise Government bills—something that they did not do. We are answering significantly more written parliamentary questions than his Government ever did.

I have to remind the House that the right hon. Gentleman's Government illegally prorogued Parliament when they could not get their own way—something that he went out and defended to his constituents. The Conservatives had a Prime Minister who was found guilty of misleading this House—something that the right hon. Gentleman also defended. When an MP broke the standards rules, the Conservatives tried to change them. They had to be dragged here time and again. This Government respects Parliament. We stand up for the rights of Parliament. His Government traduced them.

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that there is a certain irony in the SNP raising this matter, given the regularity with which SNP Ministers trail Scottish Government announcements in the press before coming to the Chamber in Holyrood? That was certainly the case when I served as a Member of the Scottish Parliament. It is vital that important announcements on key areas of policy are made in this House first, so is it not right that this Government have come forward with so many oral statements on key areas of policy, including the vital trade deal that we have recently secured with India, which is of such importance to the Scottish economy?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend makes a really good point: the trade deal with India is really good for Scottish distilleries. It will bring in over £1 billion of additional trade for the Scottish whisky sector. I was not aware of his experience in the Scottish Parliament, but he makes a very good point.

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

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) for securing this urgent question. All of us in this Chamber were elected to represent our constituents and to put the interests of the country first, and to do that we must be able to scrutinise the Government's plans and policies. The best way to do that is in this Chamber and as soon as possible, so we are disappointed that they have chosen to make announcements in this way.

We also note that this is not the first time. The shadow Leader of the House has mentioned various examples, and I would like to add some more. On the NHS, for example, the Government have, without any statement in the Chamber, made key decisions such as dropping cross-party talks on social care, cutting integrated care board budgets by 50% and scrapping nearly half of NHS targets. The question must be: why are the Government so worried about bringing these issues to the Floor first?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Member for that question, but I have to disagree with her analysis. The Secretary of State for Health and his Ministers have made eight oral statements to the House so far this Session, nearly all of which have been taken by the Secretary of State himself, and they have lasted for a long time. They have been answering many written parliamentary questions, laying written ministerial statements and appearing before Select Committees. The Prime Minister himself has made six oral statements to this House, and has appeared before the Liaison Committee twice already in this Session, far outstripping his predecessors' record. So we are accountable, although of course we can always do better and improve, which is what we seek to do. We are so busy as a Government in getting on with delivering the change that people have voted for, but we are doing our best to inform the House.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): At points over the last few years, the most senior SNP leaders in Scotland have been under police investigation, while their Government are failing, with Ayrshire ferries that should have cost £80 million costing half a billion and being years late, one in six Scots being on waiting lists and the shambolic creation of Social Security Scotland costing double at £700 million. With this constant waste of taxpayers' money, does the Leader of the House agree that the SNP should not be looked to as the model of good government?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend makes the very important point that we should all hold ourselves to high standards of accountability and transparency, and perhaps the Scottish nationalist party should do that as the Scottish Government.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The right hon. Lady is an attentive Leader of the House, and I hope the Government show the same degree of loyalty to her after a tough couple of weeks that she is showing to them. Although I do acknowledge that the Government make many statements to the House, all too often they make them to the media first, as you noted, Madam Deputy Speaker, in your announcement on Monday:

"Mr Speaker does not understand why the Government persist in making announcements in this way, when the ministerial code is absolutely clear".—[*Official Report*, 12 May 2025; Vol. 767, c. 47.]

Will the Leader of the House take back the message, even if she cannot confess it on the Floor of the House, that they are going too far and they need to stop?

Lucy Powell: First, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his very kind remarks. He is a very attentive Member in raising matters with me at business questions where the Government are falling short of our commitment to transparency and openness on ministerial questions, correspondence and so on, which I follow up for him.

As I said in my opening remarks, we endeavour to make these important announcements to the House first when the House is in session. Obviously, the right hon. Gentleman will appreciate that at times those announcements are not made because the House is not in session or we want to give Members ample time to fully consider the detailed documentation sitting alongside them. I reassure him, however, that I speak to my Cabinet colleagues about this very regularly, as does the

Prime Minister, and I speak to Mr Speaker about it as well, and we will continue to raise our game to ensure that big, important statements are brought to the House.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): Further to the detail the Leader of the House has set out in her response to the urgent question, can she say a little more about the modernisation agenda she is championing? I refer Members to the fact that I am a member of the Modernisation Committee, which is so ably chaired by the Leader of the House. Does she agree that all Members on both sides of the House should take the agenda seriously, so that we can faithfully and to the fullest of our ability serve the constituents whom we are here to serve?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that. As a member of the Modernisation Committee, he knows that I am determined to ensure that this House of Commons, and Parliament, becomes and remains the crucible of national debate once again—if, indeed, it ever was enough of a crucible—and that is one of the agendas we are delivering. I want to ensure that all Members across the House—particularly, those from the smaller parties who, in our new multi-party House of Commons, perhaps do not have the access that others do—have ample opportunity to scrutinise Government legislation and make the most of this House of Commons. I want to proceed on the basis of cross-party agreement, so that every Member of this House feels they are able to scrutinise and hold to account the Government of the day.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) for securing this urgent question. It is not the first time that she has had to raise this issue during her parliamentary career. It appears that whoever is on the Government Benches conveniently forgets everything they said when they were on the Opposition Benches. The Leader of the House will recall the former shadow Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for Walsall and Bloxwich (Valerie Vaz), warning the then Tory Government:

“Parliament must be told first: we are not irrelevant.”—[*Official Report*, 19 March 2020; Vol. 673, c. 1169.]

That warning is as true for this Labour Government as it was for the previous Tory Administration. Is what we are witnessing a case of acute amnesia or simply a belief that it is now their turn to treat Members of the House with contempt?

Lucy Powell: I disagree with the hon. Member's analysis. As I have made absolutely clear, this Government have made 145 statements in 133 sitting days, which is more than one a day. The vast majority of those oral statements have been made by Secretaries of State, which we did not see under the previous Government. Indeed, for many months, I and others were calling for the then Foreign Secretary to come to this House to answer questions, which the previous Government blocked because he was in the other place. We have laid 633 written statements and answered thousands more parliamentary questions in this Session. I take very seriously our duty to lay ourselves open for transparency, scrutiny and openness with this House, and we will continue to strive for ever-increasing respect and standards.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): As the Member of Parliament for Dunfermline and Dollar—which was, after all, where the infamous campervan was found—I have had a front row seat for the SNP's commitment to transparency. Having heard more from SNP Members about their position on transparency and openness, does the Leader of the House agree that it is scandalous for them to raise transparency when it took freedom of information requests to find out more about when the former First Minister met the President of Turkey to discuss, among other issues, Scottish trade?

Lucy Powell: I think my hon. Friend makes a very good point, and I do not need to add to it.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I think it would be fair to say that this is not the first Government who have disregarded this particular provision of the ministerial code, but may I put it to the Leader of the House that if the charge is that the Government, for their own calculated and tactical advantage, have breached the ministerial code by announcing something outside this Chamber, surely the person determining whether such a breach has occurred cannot be the leader of that Government? Is it not time to look again at the recommendations made by, among others, the Committee on Standards in Public Life, of which I was once a member, about how the decision maker as to whether the ministerial code has been breached should be the independent adviser on ministerial standards, not the Prime Minister?

Lucy Powell: The right hon. and learned Member will know that the independent adviser on the ministerial code appointed by the previous Government was reappointed by this Government, and that the independent adviser's powers were strengthened to be able to initiate inquiries. Those inquiries do not now need to be initiated by the Prime Minister.

We are raising standards when it comes to Members of Parliament, and Ministers as well. We are holding ourselves accountable to much higher standards than happened under the previous Government. I would just reiterate for the House that the ministerial code says:

“When Parliament is in session, the most important announcements of government policy should be made in the first instance in Parliament.”

There are times when Parliament is not in session, and announcements are brought to the House at other times.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): As a new Member of this House, I have noticed that on almost every single day on which Parliament sits, there is a statement from the Government, alongside, quite rightly, urgent questions. Will the Leader of the House use the Modernisation Committee to look at more ways that we can scrutinise the work of the Government without slowing down the delivery of government, which is needed to rebuild Britain?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend makes a good point about the balance of business in a day. We are bringing forward a number of key pieces of legislation, and hon. Members from across the House want ample time to scrutinise that legislation. Obviously, statements and urgent questions can eat into the time for doing that; a balance needs to be struck. The Modernisation Committee

[Lucy Powell]

is looking at these issues—at how we can best use parliamentary time to ensure that the Government are adequately scrutinised and held accountable, including by Back Benchers, every sitting day.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I was here on Thursday, responding as shadow health Minister to the debate on brain tumours. The debate was brought forward because of the delay to the statement on the US trade deal. We were waiting for almost an hour for that statement. Can the Leader of the House confirm that there was no pressure from the Prime Minister, or indeed Donald Trump, to ensure that the announcement was made? She has repeatedly referred to what happens if the House is not sitting, but the House was sitting all day on Thursday. In fact, many Members had to change travel plans and meetings to be in the Chamber. The business was changed purely so that a press conference could happen before the statement in the Chamber. Can she rule out pressure from the Prime Minister or Donald Trump on this occasion?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely can rule that out. As I said, an agreement on the very important UK-US trade deal was emerging, and events were fast-moving; the timing was changing throughout the day. The deal was not agreed until the announcement was made. We were trying to balance those factors throughout the day. It was made clear to the House earlier in the day that there would be a statement once it could happen, and the Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security came to this House as soon as possible. We were mindful of the fact that there were many people in the Gallery for the Backbench Business debate on brain tumours, which the hon. Gentleman talked about. We were trying to not disrupt the business of the House that day, but sometimes big global events happen, and the people in charge of those big global events are not considering the sitting hours, or the wellbeing of Members of Parliament. The timing was not the Prime Minister's, either.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Is the ministerial code binding, optional, or merely aspirational? Given the blatant disregard of what the code says about making statements, can the House have confidence that Ministers adhere diligently to the other requirements of the code?

Lucy Powell: Ministers are subject to the ministerial code, and the Prime Minister judges Ministers by their adherence to it. As I said, the independent adviser on the ministerial code has a new power, given to him by the Prime Minister, to instigate inquiries relating to the ministerial code. I reiterate that the ministerial code says:

“When Parliament is in session, the most important announcements of government policy should be made in the first instance in Parliament.”

There are many ways in which that can be done, other than through oral statements on the Floor of the House.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): In early November, Mr Speaker asked the Secretary of State for Education in this Chamber to start a leak inquiry to find out why the announcement that tuition fees would be raised was first made to the press, rather than the

House. It is now mid-May. Will the Leader of the House please update us on when that inquiry will report? Has it actually begun?

Lucy Powell: The Secretary of State for Education made absolutely clear to the House, then and on a subsequent occasion, her fury that elements of the announcement were leaked moments before she stood at the Dispatch Box to make a very important announcement to this House. The announcement had hitherto been kept completely under wraps, and no one had sight of it. She has spoken to Mr Speaker about that. I will ensure that any findings from that investigation are reported to the hon. Lady.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): We have seen the contempt in which the Government hold the WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—women, pensioners and the disabled, and their contempt for Scotland's energy sector, job creators and the hospice sector, but that is all a function of policy. Policy is discretionary and therefore, for better or worse—usually worse—legitimate. Adhering to the ministerial code is not a matter of discretion. To be honest, it is a little beneath the Leader of the House to say, “We don't announce things to Parliament first every time, but we do some of the time, and sometimes the House isn't sitting.” Every example presented to her today relates to a time when the House was sitting. When will she relay to the Government and the Prime Minister that Members are severely annoyed by the Government's repeated inaction? For her information, contrary to what is being said by the three Scottish craws sitting on a wall behind her, there is no such duty on Scottish Government Ministers as that set out in section 9.1 of the ministerial code.¹

Lucy Powell: As I have made clear, we take the ministerial code, and respect for this House and Parliament, incredibly seriously. We have driven up standards in that regard—standards that were, as I have said, woefully not upheld by the previous Government, who disregarded Parliament time after time. Can things improve? Can we do better? Of course we can, and we do our very best to. I remind the House that many times, when statements have been made to this House first, I have got the criticism from many colleagues that they were not able to consider the issues properly before questioning the Minister. We need to get that right, too. We are doing our very best, and we will continue to drive up standards.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) for her urgent question. The people of Britain have lost faith in politics and politicians. It is really important that what we do in this place, since the Labour Government came to power and from this day forward, is aimed at rebuilding that trust. What reassurance will the Minister give me, other Members of this House and our electorate that the Government will not deliberately or knowingly breach the ministerial code going forward?

Lucy Powell: As I have said, I am determined to ensure that the House of Commons becomes and remains the crucible of national debate, and has the highest standards and the best behaviour and culture. We have been looking at some of those issues on the Modernisation Committee. We must also ensure that independent Members

1.[Official Report, 19 May 2025; Vol. 767, c. 782.] (Correction)

like the hon. Gentleman and the smaller parties have their voice heard in this House. I think this House has shown itself at times to have all those things. I have taken steps to raise standards by taking action on MPs' second jobs, and to ensure that those who misbehave are not on the estate and have action taken against them. I will continue to do that. I hope that he, the smaller parties and other parties across the House will join us in taking steps to ensure that we have the best behaviour and the highest standards, and that this House can hold the Government to account and be the crucible of national debate that we all want it to be.

Infected Blood Inquiry: Government Response

2.40 pm

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on the Government's work to respond to the recommendations made in the infected blood inquiry's 20 May 2024 report. I am grateful for the opportunity to update the House on this work.

On 20 May 2024, the then Prime Minister issued an apology on behalf of the state for the devastating impact that the use of infected blood and infected blood products has had on countless lives. That was echoed by the current Prime Minister, who was then on the Opposition Front Bench. I once again reiterate that apology wholeheartedly. No Member of this House will be in any doubt of the harm resulting from the infected blood scandal. This Government are firm that we must listen to the infected blood community and the inquiry and make tangible changes to the way that our institutions conduct themselves. As the inquiry's report made clear, however, an apology is meaningful only if it is accompanied by action, and I am here today to set out the actions we are taking to respond to the inquiry's recommendations.

Last week, the inquiry held further hearings on the timeliness and adequacy of the Government's response on compensation. I attended to give evidence, along with members of the community who have been impacted by this scandal; I encourage all Members to listen to the incredibly moving testimonies of those impacted. The inquiry has set out its intention to publish a further report, and the Government remain committed to co-operating with the inquiry and acting on its recommendations.

On 17 December 2024, the Government published our initial response to the inquiry's recommendations. I laid before the House an accompanying written statement, in which I committed to come before the House with a comprehensive update on our response to each of the inquiry's recommendations within a year of the inquiry's report. This statement fulfils that commitment. I am grateful for the engagement of all Members across the House, and am pleased to have the opportunity to discuss the Government's progress today. Once again, I thank Sir Brian Langstaff and his team for their work. The recommendations he made are wide-ranging, well considered and necessarily detailed.

The Government have worked closely with the devolved Governments to make progress on the implementation of the recommendations, which we hope will lead to meaningful change. I am grateful to my ministerial colleagues for their co-operation, and in particular the Under-Secretary of State for Public Health and Prevention, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton), for her leadership on the recommendations for which her Department is responsible. I also thank Health Ministers in the devolved Governments: the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health in Scotland, Jenni Minto; the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care in Wales, Jeremy Miles; and the Minister of Health in Northern Ireland, Mike Nesbitt. Their engagement has been invaluable in ensuring that our approach is as unified as possible across the whole

[Nick Thomas-Symonds]

United Kingdom. The Government will continue to engage closely with the devolved Governments on issues such as support for advocacy charities and implementation by the national health service.

I recognise that for many in the community, the Government's actions come after decades have passed. There is nothing that can put right the damage done by inaction on the part of multiple previous Governments, and it is not my intention for this statement to diminish that. My priority now is focusing on delivering meaningful change to ensure that the scandal of infected blood, among many other scandals, is never allowed to happen again.

I turn now to the recommendations. Alongside this statement, I have published an accompanying paper on gov.uk setting out in detail the Government's response to each of the recommendations, and I will place a copy in the Libraries of the Houses. Equally, I am firm on the importance of these recommendations to the infected blood community, and I am writing today to community representatives to inform them of the publication of the Government's response.

The UK and devolved Governments have accepted the inquiry's recommendations either in full or in principle, and implementation is under way across Government, arm's length bodies and healthcare settings. Where recommendations are accepted in principle, we have sought to explain the rationale for doing so, balancing agreement with the spirit of the recommendations and their implementation. Some are subject to future spending decisions by the Department of Health and Social Care.

I have noted the recommendations that have, quite rightly, drawn attention from across this House in previous debates, so I will take a moment to touch on those today. I turn first to the recommendation on compensation. I am grateful to those who have attended previous debates on this matter in the House; indeed, many are present today. The Infected Blood Compensation Authority delivered on the Government's commitment to provide the first full compensation payments by the end of last year. IBCA publishes its data on compensation on a monthly basis; as of 6 May, payments totalling more than £96 million have been made. IBCA continues to scale up its operations to deliver compensation as quickly as possible and has confirmed plans to contact an average of 100 people every week to begin their claims. I am pleased to announce today that the interim chair, Sir Robert Francis KC, who developed vital work to inform the design of the compensation scheme and has overseen its delivery to this point, will continue in his role for a further 18 months.

Another recommendation of particular interest to right hon. and hon. Members is recommendation 10, relating to funding for charities providing patient advocacy services. I am pleased that last week, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton), wrote to the charities confirming that £500,000 of funding has been made available for this financial year to ensure that the vital patient advocacy work they do for the infected blood community is sustained. Officials are now meeting the charities to begin the grant process to finalise the awards.

The Government recognise the importance of recommendation 5 on ending the defensive culture in the civil service. It is imperative we get this right so that the public can put their trust in institutions that have let down not just the infected blood community, but victims of other scandals that have taken place over decades. The Prime Minister has committed to legislation on a duty of candour, which he has confirmed will apply to public authorities and public servants, and include criminal sanctions. We are consulting on the issue and working to draft the best, most effective version of a Hillsborough law as part of our wider efforts to create a politics of public service.

The inquiry's final recommendation relates to giving effect to the recommendations it has made. I am only too aware of the strength of feeling here and the need to ensure that the infected blood scandal does not fade from the public consciousness. A lot more needs to be done, and, as I made clear to the inquiry in my evidence last week, I am open to considering how we can improve the Government's actions to ensure that we deliver justice for the victims of this devastating scandal. As progress continues to be made, my colleagues and I will report on the recommendations for which we are responsible. We are committed to transparency and accountability, and will be publishing the Government's progress via a publicly accessible dashboard in due course, which will be regularly updated as progress is made.

The victims of this scandal have suffered immeasurably. I pay tribute once again to the infected blood community for their courage, perseverance and determination to demand justice for the wrongs that have been done to them. I hope that this update provides them with some reassurance that we are learning from and acting on the mistakes of the past, and that where there is more to do, this Government will do it. I commend this statement to the House.

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

2.49 pm

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement and for advance sight of it. The infected blood scandal is one of the clearest failures of the state and public services in recent years, causing enormous harm over many years to countless victims and their families. Next week marks the first anniversary of the publication of the inquiry's report, and I add my thanks and those of my hon. and right hon. Friends to Sir Brian Langstaff and his team for their work and comprehensive report.

On 21 May last year, my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) stood at the Government Dispatch Box and made clear his determination to act on the inquiry's report. I pay tribute to his work and thank him for the advice and support that he has given to me and the shadow Cabinet Office team on this issue since the election.

I am pleased that the Paymaster General picked up from where his predecessor left off. As I have said previously, both sides of the House speak as one on this issue, but sadly there is nothing that we or the Government can do that will undo the terrible damage caused by this scandal. No amount of money will bring back those

who have been lost, and no amount of lessons learned can make up for the suffering of those who contracted serious illnesses because of contaminated blood, but Ww would be not only failing in our duty, but failing all those who have died and all those who continue to live with life-changing conditions if we did not take up this battle on their behalf.

To do this, we must directly address the profound distress, anger and fear that is being expressed by victims and their families at the pace of the roll-out of the full compensation scheme. Victims in recent hearings have referred to the wait as “torture” and “disgraceful”—to mention just a few cases. Of course, the gravity of those concerns has been underscored by the decision to re-open the infected blood inquiry for a further report on compensation. Although we support that decision, we need to make sure that it does not delay the proper compensation for those who have already lost so much.

With every week and month that passes, we know that more infected and affected individuals will, sadly, die before receiving their full and final compensation. This underscores the human cost of every single day of delay. Therefore, although I recognise that the compensation authority was set up precisely to be independent of Government in operational matters, I ask the Minister whether he is content with the current pace of delivery and, if not, what he and the Government are doing to help David Foley and his team to speed up pay-outs to dying victims.

Let me turn to other recommendations made by the inquiry. May I ask the Paymaster General what progress has been made on recommendation 6 on monitoring liver damage for people who are infected with hepatitis C? On recommendation 8, which is on finding the undiagnosed, what action has been taken to ensure that patients who had transfusions before 1996 are offered a blood test for hepatitis C? Can the Paymaster General update the House on how many such tests have so far been carried out, and what assessment he has made of the additional infected and affected patients who may now be eligible for compensation?

The journey to rebuild trust with the victims and their families will be long and requires not only words of apology and commitment but, crucially, demonstrable action that proves that the Government and, indeed, this House, are listening and responding. The acknowledgement that the current compensation scheme has not yet won the full trust and confidence of the community is a start, and I hope the Government will continue to take these concerns seriously to put in place the robust changes that are necessary. We will support them in that work.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Points of order come after the statement.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I think I can anticipate the hon. Gentleman's point order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have been reassured by the Department that the statement has been sent and is on its way; I hope that deals with that issue.

Let me say to the shadow Minister that the cross-party approach that we have taken has been very important. It was the approach, as he knows, that I took with my

predecessor, the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen), to whom I have often paid tribute in this House for the diligent way in which he pursued this matter.

The shadow Minister asked me about the current pace of delivery. I am restless for progress, and will not be satisfied with the pace of delivery until everyone who is eligible for compensation has received it. He asked me about what we will do about the pace of compensation going forward. IBCA has adopted a test-and-learn approach, which has now been completed, and I expect to see a significant increase in the pace of the payments. While respecting IBCA's operational independence, I will be holding it to account, and quite rightly I will be held to account by this House over the pace of payments. I also stand ready to assist IBCA in whatever way I can to speed up the payments.

On the monitoring of liver damage, a new surveillance registry will be set up. The shadow Minister asked about the blood test prior to 1996; I will ask the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire, who is beside me on the Front Bench, to write to the shadow Minister with the precise figures.

Overall, the whole House is united on this matter. We all want to see the pace of payments speed up, and that is exactly what I am seeking to do.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Before I call any Member to speak, I would like to say that we have looked into Gregory Stafford's point regarding the lack of copies of the statement. I understand that the Department has now sent the statement to the Vote Office, and it is currently being printed and will be with us shortly. I know that the Minister will be looking into this problem and I am sure that he is as dissatisfied with the situation as the House is.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): I met two of my constituents who have been tragically affected by this scandal and attended the hearings last week. They told me what an emotional day it had been—almost like a family reunion in some ways—but they also spoke of their immense frustration at still having to fight through the long wait for justice that remains. They told me again that the pace of payments to victims and families is far too slow, and it is still unclear what evidence they need to provide to support their claim.

I welcome the fact that the Government have identified £11.8 billion to pay compensation, and that, for the first time, this has been properly budgeted for, but I am sure that my right hon. Friend will agree that the challenge now is to ensure that trust is built and maintained as we complete this process. Will he tell the House what he can do to ensure that the evidential requirements are clear to families to allow them to prepare for being contacted, that payments are accelerated, and that justice is delivered to everybody affected by this appalling scandal?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The hearing last week was an extremely moving experience. I am sure that my hon. Friend will be aware of the evidence that I gave to the inquiry. His point about evidence is important. First, so much happened a long time ago, which makes evidence difficult to source. Secondly, Sir Brian Langstaff's inquiry also identified evidence of deliberate document destruction.

[Nick Thomas-Symonds]

For those two reasons in particular, it is essential that IBCA takes a sympathetic, enabling view to the evidence that is required and has caseworkers assisting victims in finding the evidence that they need.

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

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I thank the Paymaster General for advance sight of his statement. The infected blood scandal is a harrowing story of people being failed not only by the medical professionals who treated them, but by the NHS, which should have been responsible for the safety of their treatment, and by a series of Governments who should have prevented such horror from ever taking place. As the Minister knows, I and my Liberal Democrat colleagues welcome the introduction of the infected blood compensation scheme. The Government were right to introduce the scheme at the start of the Parliament, and I am glad to hear the Minister say that the Infected Blood Compensation Authority is scaling up its operation. However, we are alarmed that the roll-out of the scheme has been far too slow, leaving victims without the justice that they deserve.

Victims and their families have been waiting for decades for answers and recognition of the suffering they endured. So far, only 106 people have received payments from IBCA, and 54 others have received offers. Compensation payouts are not due to conclude until 2029, and that date would rely on a rapid increase in the rate of payments. We are deeply concerned by the speed at which victims are receiving their long-overdue compensation, and I am glad that last week's hearings looked into the adequacy and timeliness of the Government's response. To echo the words of Sir Brian Langstaff,

"People infected and affected do not have time on their side."

To that end, and to provide confidence to victims and their families, can the Paymaster General clarify what deadline he has for the implementation of the inquiry's recommendations? Moreover, what further steps is he taking to increase the speed at which payments are being made, and can he confirm when all victims can expect to have received their long-overdue compensation? What more can be done to help those who need to provide proof of infection but whose medical records have been destroyed?

It is crucial that there are mechanisms in place to ensure that the concerns of charities, organisations and the affected individuals are heard. Supporting the work of those vital organisations and engaging with them to understand exactly the needs of those affected is crucial.

The Liberal Democrats are backing the survivors' call for a duty of candour on all public officials. As such, I am glad to hear the sentiment behind the Government's response to recommendation 5, but when will the Government bring forward proposals to that effect so that such a scandal is never repeated? Can the Paymaster General clarify why there has been a delay, given that relevant legislation was originally meant to be published in April?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: First, with regard to the current position on payments, just over £96 million has been paid, and IBCA has invited 677 claimants to begin the

process. I want to be clear about the 2029 date to which the hon. Lady referred. It is correct to say that there are, as I regard them, backstop dates of 2027 for the infected and 2029 for the affected, but that is what they are—backstops. They are not targets. The target is to make the payments as soon as possible.

The hon. Lady asked about evidence, which I dealt with in response to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper). She refers to a situation where someone's medical evidence has for whatever reason been destroyed, and that is precisely the kind of situation where we expect IBCA to take a sympathetic approach.

On the duty of candour, the Government remain committed to bringing in duty of candour legislation, but it is important that we get it right and ensure that the legislation will actually achieve the shared objective that I am sure the whole House has of trying to prevent this type of scandal from happening again. We must ensure that there are no unintended consequences, so it is because we want to get the legislation right that we are taking a bit more time.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): I thank the Paymaster General for his statement. I am in constant contact with the contaminated blood community, and they are furious and frustrated in equal measure at the lack of progress with the claims being processed. I was speaking to a haemophiliac, who as a child was unknowingly used for research all those years ago. He asked why it is that he is likely to get less in compensation after being used in an experiment than a drunken driver who crashed his car and needed a blood transfusion. I think that is a fair question. He also asked whether Members of this House understand the stress and mental torment that individuals are going through, when they are waiting on a Tuesday night for close of play to see whether they are one of the lucky hundred to have their claims processed the following week. I thank my right hon. Friend very much for everything he has done, but I think those are fair points. Does he think they are fair?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is and has been throughout this process a powerful advocate for the victims. While this is a broad tariff-based scheme, it is vital that individuals' suffering and circumstances are reflected in the awards that are made. To his latter point, I know the agony that victims are still going through in having to wait, and I know that he shares my desire to push forward with the payments as quickly as possible.

Sir Jeremy Hunt (Godalming and Ash) (Con): Can I start by commending the approach that the Paymaster General is taking? I know that he is totally sincere about getting justice and is trying his best. However, I think he knows in his heart of hearts that the system that has been put in place is not working. I have constituents, such as Sue Collins, who are asking why in March IBCA had processed the claims of only 250-odd people out of 4,000 people, when they are known to us and have been on previous payment schemes. Even more worrying is the fact that IBCA is saying that it is aiming to process a majority—that could be just 51%—by the end of 2027. Does he not agree that the right target for IBCA would be to process the vast majority—more than 90%, let us say—by the end of this year, and that it

should commit to that? That is what needs to happen, because two people are dying every single week, and justice delayed really is justice denied.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman for the work he did in government on this matter when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer. He asks about infected people who are known already because they are registered to schemes, and he is clearly right to identify that particular group in terms of prioritisation and what is known. I said last week to the inquiry that I am open to changes to the scheme that do not in themselves cause further delay. That is the open approach that I took last week at the inquiry, and it is the open approach I repeat to the House today.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and update. I know the sincerity with which he wants to deliver this culture change—this being one of many examples of failures by the state that we absolutely have to correct. As has been said by Members on both sides of the House and by constituents to me, speed in the delivery of compensation to infected and affected individuals is of paramount importance. Will my right hon. Friend say more about the conversations he is having with the devolved nations, in particular Wales, to bring efficacy to the recommendations?

Could my right hon. Friend offer any advice to my constituent Suzanne Morgan, who very recently visited my surgery? Her mother Marie Jupe died due to infected blood, but as her mother was not registered with an existing infected blood scheme or the Alliance House organisations scheme, Suzanne is not eligible for any compensation. Will he meet me to discuss that case?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: To my hon. Friend's latter point, my thoughts are with Suzanne. In respect of Suzanne's mother, although the registration deadline for the infected blood support scheme has passed, it does not mean she is not entitled to compensation. There would be an entitlement to compensation.

With regard to the point about the whole United Kingdom, one of the issues, which I am sure right hon. and hon. Members will appreciate, is that the awful days when the infected blood products were being imported were in the pre-devolution age. Many of the recommendations require measures to be implemented across the NHS, but health is of course devolved. The undertaking I give to the House is that I will continue to work closely with Ministers in the devolved Administrations to get the equity that my hon. Friend talks about regarding the recommendations across the UK.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): Clearly, getting to a good and timely operation of the compensation scheme will take the Paymaster General's personal attention, and I know that he will give it that attention because of his dedication to getting this right. Could he give an update to the House on the anticipated memorial dedicated specifically to the children who were infected at Treloar's?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: It is absolutely right that we have both a national memorial and a memorial dedicated specifically to the children who suffered so much at Treloar's, and it is right that the memorials both recognise

what has happened and ensure that it will be remembered by future generations. The Government are following the inquiry's recommendation that a steering committee be formed to decide what memorials are provided and where, with consideration being given as well to memorials in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland. The membership of the steering committee will reflect the experiences of all routes of transmission, those infected and those affected, and crucially it will contain representatives of all the UK's Administrations.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I fully agree with the need for urgency that has been reiterated on both sides of the House. I have spoken to constituents who are frustrated, and the turmoil and distress they are in is immense. Will the Minister provide more detail on how individuals are being kept updated on the progress of their claims? What support is provided to address those cases, in terms of dedicated caseworkers?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On the first point, IBCA publishes a regular monthly newsletter with data of the payments being made. On support, the money that the Government have announced for the charities that provide such vital patient advocacy is hugely important. In respect of those who are making claims, I have signed off money for both legal support and financial advice, which is hugely important too.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Minister referred briefly to something called a duty of candour, which will try to avoid a repetition of what was described as a

“defensive culture in the civil service”.

Will he expand on that phenomenon? It is quite extraordinary, is it not, that when people in all innocence were infected with lethal diseases by the NHS, civil servants should have gathered round to deny them the help and compensation they needed? Surely some sort of sanction ought to be involved. Will anyone be held to account for this, because otherwise, it will happen again, won't it?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: To the right hon. Gentleman's point about potential criminal sanctions, I have always said that I stand ready to provide whatever evidence might be requested of the Cabinet Office and across Government to any investigation. To his point about a duty of candour, Sir Brian Langstaff said that there was not an explicit conspiracy; rather, there was a culture of institutional defensiveness whereby individual public servants put personal and institutional reputation above the public good. As I said earlier in response to the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), the Government will bring forward legislation on a duty of candour. However, it is not just about legislation, landmark though it is; it is about leadership across public service to change culture, which will be important in the years ahead.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): I thank the Paymaster General for his statement and for his correspondence on this issue on behalf of my constituent Alex Robinson. Alex lost her father in 2006 to this scandal, having already lost her mother as a child. She was her father's carer from the age of 13. She is concerned that when a deceased victim leaves no spouse or partner, the estate is not entitled to the same compensation,

[Mr Jonathan Brash]

irrespective of the role any member of that estate may have played in the victim's life. Does the Minister agree that there are exceptional and unique cases, such as Alex's, and that they need to be looked at differently? Will he meet me to explore how we can ensure that that happens?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I think the thoughts of the whole House are with my hon. Friend's constituent, Alex, regarding the loss of her parents. On the point about carers, they are eligible for compensation under the scheme. If my hon. Friend is willing to write to me, I will be more than happy to have an individual discussion and correspondence on that case.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Last week's hearings were both fascinating and disturbing. One discrepancy was pointed out to me, however, about bereaved partners and whether their loved one died before 31 March. Partners of those who died before 31 March could receive up to 75% of their support payment, whereas newly bereaved partners are no longer able to register for those payments. These people were often forced to give up their career to care for their loved ones and were totally dependent upon those payments. Will the Minister commit to reviewing and rectifying that unfairness, so that no bereaved partner is left behind simply because of the date of their loved one's death?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: To be absolutely clear, the cut-off date is about registration for the support schemes; it is not a cut-off date for entitlement to compensation. When issues around this were raised with me at the inquiry last week, I said that if there was a particular issue around a gap between cessation of payment and when compensation might be received, I was willing to go away and look at it, and I will do that. The test that I apply is whether we are pushing this scheme forward. We have to ensure that I, and collectively we, do not do things that would cause even further delay.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): One of the first pieces of correspondence that I received as a new MP on 10 July last year was from my constituent Robert Dickie, who passionately told me about his brother, who died aged 31 from AIDS and hepatitis C after being infected with contaminated blood products. I therefore welcome today's update. The Government recently announced that they have allocated funding for charities, which is a recommendation from the inquiry. Will the Minister outline what steps he has taken with the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that the funding gets to those charities?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The charities have done a remarkable job in supporting victims and in patient advocacy. I know that there have been meetings already with officials, and he can be assured that I am working with the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton), who is here on the Front Bench, to ensure that that money gets to the charities as quickly as possible.

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): As the Minister is aware, my constituent Gary Webster has had to live with HIV and hepatitis C since being given infected blood as a pupil at Treloar's. Gary's health is failing fast and he fears that he will not live to see compensation. Will the Minister give Gary and the other surviving Treloar's boys any reassurance that they will be invited to claim for compensation this year?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: IBCA has been set up in such a way that it is operationally independent, and I respect that independence. As I indicated in a previous answer—indeed, the hon. Lady has raised Gary's case with me on a number of occasions—I stand ready, first, to hold IBCA to account; and secondly, to give support as required by IBCA to ensure that we are moving forward and quickening the pace after the test-and-learn approach that it has used.

Tom Collins (Worcester) (Lab): Families in Worcester have spent years in limbo, grieving the loss of loved ones while navigating decades of delays and bureaucratic mazes that were handed down by the very systems intended to support them. I therefore welcome this statement of ambition in urgently delivering compensation and justice to those both infected and affected. The changes outlined at the end of March relating to people who lose their spouses as a result of infected blood are causing anxiety in my constituency. My constituents are concerned that the injustice of delay will be extended to them more severely than to others. Will the Paymaster General reassure widows and widowers whose spouses die from April this year that they will not be waiting years and years for support payments?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend raises an important point. As I indicated to the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart), who is no longer in his place, this is not a deadline to claim compensation; it is a deadline for applying for the support schemes. As I also indicated in my previous answer, if injustice arises from a gap in time, I will look at that.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): As a number of Members have said to the Minister, speed is obviously of the essence. I have two questions. First, even though I hear him say that there is a backstop date by which he wants everything to be completed, would it be possible for individual applicants to have a target landing date on which IBCA will contact them? That way, their expectations are managed and people can think about their affairs in due course. Secondly, can the Minister say, hand on heart, that IBCA has enough resources? If it had twice as many people, could it move twice as fast?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: In answer to the right hon. Gentleman's first question, I am sure that he, as a former Minister, will understand that I respect IBCA's operational independence in terms of the payments that are being made, but as I have indicated, I stand ready to help to push this forward. Secondly, absolutely there are adequate resources here. We have allocated £11.8 billion to this scheme. He used the example of the number of caseworkers, and I stand ready to assist with that in order to push things forward with IBCA.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement, which fulfils his earlier promise to make one, and for his correspondence with me on a specific case. I also welcome the fact that the Government are committed, in principle or in full, to all the recommendations made by the inquiry. Last week at the inquiry I met my constituent Martin Threadgold, one of the victims of this scandal. Martin has expressed to me several concerns about the pace at which victims are being compensated, and those concerns have been echoed across the House today. May I ask two questions on Martin's behalf? First, £11.8 billion was allocated in the Budget to this scheme, so can the Minister confirm how much has been paid out so far? Secondly, will he use his good offices to ensure that IBCA pays out as many claims as possible and as fast as it possibly can?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this—he speaks powerfully on behalf of his constituent. As I indicated in an earlier answer, just over £96 million has been paid out, but I will continue to use my ministerial office, as well as working to hold IBCA to account, to move from what has been IBCA's test-and-learn phase into a different phase and start to really speed up these payments.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): I thank the Minister for all the work he is doing to lead on this matter and bring justice to all the victims, and indeed for his statement today. Is it his understanding that victims of the infected blood scandal should not be worse off in the transition from the interim payments to the new compensation scheme? I have spoken to one victim, a constituent, who seems to have been offered a compensation offer that is much, much reduced compared with the offer he previously received under the special category mechanism.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The issue of how the special category mechanism is translated across into what is known as the health supplemental route in relation to infected people is something I discussed before the inquiry last week. As I am sure the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, I do not know the facts of the specific case he is talking about, but if he is willing to write to me with the two different figures and the way in which his constituent feels that he is worse off, I will be more than happy to look at it.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): The partner of Helen, my constituent from Farnham, died in 1994 from infected blood. Unfortunately, Helen now has stage 4B ovarian cancer, so she is not in a great state. She wrote to the Chief Secretary in August and, despite chasing this up numerous times, it took months for a rather unsympathetic response from the Chief Secretary to come back. I know that the Paymaster General is keen to speed this up for those infected, but there are also plenty of people who were affected and whose time is short, so can he commit to speeding up the process for them, too?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point: we have people who are infected and people who are affected in a terrible way by this scandal, and he speaks powerfully about Helen and the particular circumstances she finds herself in. I am sure the thoughts

of the whole House will be with Helen. I have not, to my knowledge, seen the piece of correspondence that he is talking about, but if he wants to write to me directly at the Cabinet Office about Helen's circumstances, I am happy to look at that. I should add that I expect payments to the affected to begin by the end of this year.

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): I thank the Minister for today's update. Although I welcome the progress that has been made on the compensation scheme, as he has highlighted, I once again have to highlight the case of my constituent who was infected with hepatitis C during a transplant operation when she was 15. She has suffered terrible physical and mental illness throughout most of her life. The fact that she was infected in 1993, after the cut-off date for the support scheme, means that she has had no formal acknowledgment of her suffering from the Infected Blood Compensation Authority, and no support payments or interim payments. Can the Minister formally address the concerns of unregistered infected people from that period from 1991 to 1996, when we know people were still being infected, and commit to urgently recognising their suffering and the urgency of their compensation claims?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Again, I am sure that the thoughts of the whole House will be with the hon. Gentleman's constituent, given the terrible experience that she has clearly had. With regard to the category of victims he is talking about—unregistered, living, infected people—he is absolutely right to raise their position. The objective of this compensation scheme is to ensure that every victim, whatever their circumstances, receives the compensation they are due, and that obviously includes his constituent.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): I will be forever indebted to my constituent Clive Smith, who is also the president of the Haemophilia Society. He has been a long-standing advocate and a voice for those victims seeking justice for being affected and infected. Of course, time is of the essence and many victims still feel disillusioned and that the Government are dragging their heels. While the Government have accepted publicly that victims will die before they get the compensation they are owed, as has been referenced in this Chamber, surely this just illustrates that the system is not going fast enough. What reassurance can the Minister provide that compensation will be delivered at speed and that the system will be as simple as possible for those affected and infected to apply for compensation? Also, what reassurance can he provide that they will be kept informed and updated as part of that process?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I have met Clive Smith and I pay tribute to the campaigning work that he has done over many years. On updating, I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is important—that is why IBCA publishes regular newsletters with updates on the statistics—but he also identifies a statistic that should give us all pause for thought, which is that a victim of this scandal is still dying every few days. That shows the impetus and the imperative to speed these compensation payments up, and that is absolutely what I am committed to do.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): A constituent of mine infected with hepatitis C and under the special category mechanism has written to express their distress that earlier this year supplementary regulations removed the provisions, which they had previously been promised, to bring their compensation in line with those with cirrhosis. The group were assured that there would not need to go through another round of evidence gathering, yet they have been left without recourse through this mechanism. Will the Minister explain why these provisions were changed, what redress is available to this cohort of approximately 915 people, and what steps will be brought forward to ensure that further reassurances are not breached?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The issue that the hon. Gentleman raises about the special category mechanism is one that I was asked about in front of the inquiry last week. It relates to conditions that qualified under the special category mechanism, some of which go into the core route for infected people and some of which go into the supplemental route. I gave an undertaking to the inquiry last week that I would look at whether there were particular issues, and I think that is what he is identifying in relation to his constituent. As I said quite openly to the inquiry last week, the test that I use around changes to the scheme is to ensure that it does not cause even further delay.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I am grateful for the Minister's statement, but I too would like to identify the gaping hole in the compensation scheme that relates to the special category mechanism. I point out that some of my constituents are in very poor health and their lives may be limited time-wise, yet they will end up with less compensation than someone who is in stage one and is healthy. At every point throughout the process, the compensation scheme has said that the SCM infected should be compensated. The infected blood inquiry said the same thing. The Government's own expert group also said in August 2024, until they were hauled back into the Cabinet Office and then they changed their mind, that they must have compensation. I invite the Paymaster General to meet me and my affected constituent—it would have to be online, and it would be with his carer because this gentleman is very ill and suffering dreadfully, and yet he seems to have been excluded from getting fair compensation.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Again, the hon. Lady quite reasonably raises the issue of the special category mechanism, which I answered a question about from her hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon). On the specific case she talks about, I would be grateful if she wrote to me with all the details, and then I would be more than happy to ensure she gets a reply as soon as possible.

Points of Order

3.30 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have given notice to the Speaker's Office and the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) of this point of order. I refer to column 95 of *Hansard* on Monday 12 May. In an intervention on the Minister in the debate on border security and immigration, the Member claimed that

“more than 600 illegal migrants have entered this country today. They could get up to all sorts of mischief, and commit crimes and maybe even acts of terrorism. Does she agree that these young men crossing the channel should be immediately detained and deported, along with the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn)?”—[*Official Report*, 12 May 2025; Vol. 767, c. 95.]

Do you agree, Madam Deputy Speaker, that this kind of language, innuendo and inaccuracy is unbecoming of this place and not fit to be uttered in this building, and that Members when they speak in Parliament should show respect for each other, rather than risk bringing our whole political process into disrepute? I have no problem with debate, but people should not stoop to abuse, fundamental inaccuracies and conjecture, as the hon. Member did, and I have informed him so already.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for giving me notice of his point of order. I understand that he has informed the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) that he intended to refer to him in the Chamber. The right hon. Member has put his point on the record. While I am not persuaded that anything unparliamentary occurred in the debate, I remind all Members that “good temper and moderation”, in the words of “Erskine May”, should be

“the characteristics of parliamentary debate.”

I encourage all Members to act towards each other with courtesy.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have given prior notice of my point of order to the Speaker's Office. I seek your guidance on a matter concerning procedure relating to the ability of Members to hold the Government to account. Yesterday, I attempted to table a question relating to the use of RAF Akrotiri by Israeli bomber planes but was blocked. I received the following response: “The Government has blocked questions on the use of military bases”. The reasoning for that block was given as an answer from the Minister to a similar question tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) on 4 October, with the Minister responding on 14 October. Since then, six questions have been tabled relating to the activities of RAF Akrotiri, all without obstruction, and they all received timely answers from the Minister. Under this new ruling, all would have been ruled out of order and automatically blocked, yet they were allowed to be tabled.

Given the importance of transparency and parliamentary scrutiny, particularly in matters of defence, this raises serious concerns. Operational decisions must not be taken on an ad hoc basis to impede the ability of parliamentarians to scrutinise the decisions of Government. Will you advise on whether it is in order for the Table

Office to decide to block legitimate questions in this way and on what recourse Members have when attempts to scrutinise and debate Government policy and activity are being blocked?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for her point of order. She should raise the matter with the Table Office in the first instance. I can, however, advise her that the Minister for the Armed Forces, in response to a written parliamentary question on 14 October, indicated that the Government would not

“comment on any foreign nations’ military aircraft movement...within UK airspace or on UK overseas bases.”

It is not the Table Office but the Government that have blocked questions on this specific subject. Other questions about activities at RAF Akrotiri may none the less be in order. I advise her to talk to the Table Office, who are always happy to help.

Keir Mather (Selby) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I gave prior notice, both to the Speaker’s Office and to the Member concerned, that I intended to raise this point of order. Yesterday, the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) appeared on Channel 4 in his role as deputy leader of Reform UK. Filming in my constituency, he called into question the future of our local power station and therefore the hundreds of jobs that it supports locally, which I know will cause real anxiety for constituents in Selby. He did not inform me that he was coming to Selby or that he intended to use our industry, our jobs and our local communities as a political football for Reform UK’s national agenda. On behalf of workers in my constituency, how might I prevent this from happening again, and how might I relay the message that if he wishes to push his anti-worker, anti-jobs and, quite frankly, anti-Yorkshire agenda, he can do so from his constituency across the border in Lincolnshire?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order—I understand that he has informed the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness that he intended to raise it. As he and other Members are aware, paragraph 44 of the guide to conventions and courtesies states that

“Members must inform colleagues in advance whenever...a Member intends to visit another colleague’s constituency (except for purely private purposes). All reasonable efforts should be taken to notify the other Member and failure to do so is rightly regarded by colleagues as very discourteous.”

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Following on from the point of order made by the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), the comments made against him were absolutely disgusting and disrespectful. The words we use in this place can have

direct consequences on the outside and impact on the security of Members. What steps can be taken to hold Members to account for the language that they use in this place, so that debate is respectful at all times?

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order, but the hon. Member has placed his comments and feelings on the record.

BILLS PRESENTED

SUSTAINABLE AVIATION FUEL BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Heidi Alexander, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Ed Miliband, Hilary Benn, Ian Murray, Jo Stevens, Steve Reed and Mike Kane, presented a Bill to make provision about sustainable aviation fuel.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed with explanatory notes (Bill 240-EN).

VICTIMS OF RAPE AND SERIOUS SEXUAL OFFENCES (FREE ACCESS TO SENTENCING REMARKS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sarah Olney, supported by Josh Babarinde, presented a Bill to require the provision, free of charge, to victims of rape and serious sexual offences of transcripts of sentencing remarks delivered following conviction for those offences; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July, and to be printed (Bill 241).

ENERGY AND EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Carla Denyer presented a Bill to set a timeline for the phasing out of UK oil and gas production and the decommissioning of related infrastructure; to require the Secretary of State to publish a plan for ensuring that oil and gas workers have access to appropriate redeployment or retraining opportunities, and to involve unions and communities in the production of this plan, which should include plans for funding; to make provision for the establishment of a training fund for workers in the oil and gas industry, to which oil and gas companies would contribute by paying a levy; to make provision for a proportion of workers’ wages to be guaranteed by the state for a defined period after they leave the oil and gas industry; to introduce sectoral collective bargaining in the energy industry; to extend legislation relating to pay and conditions for UK onshore workers to cover all offshore workers in the UK Continental Shelf and UK Exclusive Economic Area; to require GB Energy’s investments to support UK jobs; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 July, and to be printed (Bill 244).

Equitable Life Policyholders (Compensation)

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

3.38 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the paying out of compensation under the Equitable Life (Payments) Act 2010 for persons adversely affected by maladministration in the regulation before December 2001 of the Equitable Life Assurance Society; and for connected purposes.

Most Members will know that I have, for the past 15 years, been campaigning for proper compensation for Equitable Life policyholders who lost pension savings because of Government and regulatory maladministration. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton)—a friend is what he is to me—has also campaigned, as have many other friends and colleagues from across the House. This has always been a cross-party campaign for justice; MPs from six political parties support the proposed Bill.

For the benefit of Members who may not be familiar with the scandal, it is a sorry saga spanning nearly a quarter of a century. The Equitable Life Assurance Society was considered the gold standard of the retirement savings world. Founded in 1762—the world's oldest mutual insurer—it was widely respected and considered a safe place to invest a hard-earned pension. However, it turned out that in the 1990s the society was effectively being run as Ponzi scheme. Returns and bonuses were being funded by contributions from new Members. The house of cards eventually collapsed in 2000, following a House of Lords court case, which led to the inescapable conclusion that the society did not have enough money to cover its commitments. The question inevitably arose as to how the collapse of one of the biggest and apparently safest pension companies could possibly have happened.

While several inquiries were set up with varying and limited remits, it was not until the parliamentary ombudsman undertook a four-year detailed investigation that we got to the bottom of what actually happened. Although the society was clearly mismanaged, the ombudsman's 2,800-page report published in 2008—I recommend it to colleagues for bedtime reading—concluded that there had been a decade of serial maladministration by Government Departments and their regulators, whose job it was to oversee the society in the first place. Specifically, the ombudsman concluded that the serial maladministration

“resulted in the true financial position of the society being concealed and misrepresented.”

The ombudsman further went on to say that

“the prudential regulation of the society during the relevant time period failed—and failed comprehensively.”

She said that it was not

“a system failure, but a failure properly to implement...the system of regulation that Parliament had enacted.”

It was the most serious maladministration ever discovered by the parliamentary ombudsman.

It is important to emphasise that the maladministration led to a failure of prudential regulation, which Government Departments and their agencies were responsible for.

Although the management of the society had failed, the ombudsman was clear that the prudential regulators alone were responsible for scrutinising the society's financial returns, and verifying its solvency position. They failed to do that to an acceptable standard. As a result, the society was able to continue to take people's money, while they had no idea of the house of sand into which they were placing their hard-earned savings for those pensions.

The ombudsman made five findings of injustice that policyholders suffered because of the maladministration. Three of them were related to financial loss. In proposing redress, the ombudsman called on the Government to,

“put those people who have suffered a relative loss back into the position that they would have been in had maladministration not occurred.”

In 2010 the incoming Chancellor of the Exchequer formally accepted all the ombudsman's findings, and apologised to the more than 1 million people affected. He accepted that the financial losses that policyholders had suffered because of the maladministration amounted to £4.3 billion. He subsequently revised that down to £4.1 billion. Despite that, the Chancellor announced that only £1.5 billion compensation would be made available as redress, citing the state of the public finances at the time. Personally, I think that where the state has accepted responsibility for a failure and accepted how much someone has lost because of that, it should provide full compensation. That is the moral, correct thing to do and, to their credit, the current Government are taking that general approach to the blood contamination and Post Office scandals, although there are clearly serious issues about agreeing individual amounts and the speed of payments in individual cases.

My Bill, however, is not about the £2.6 billion compensation still owed to those affected by the Equitable Life scandal; it is about the £1.5 billion that has already been allocated. It appears from public information, parliamentary questions, and freedom of information requests that £180 million of the allocated funding is set to be kept by the Treasury and not reach the people to whom it is owed. When the compensation scheme was announced in 2010, the Government decided that of the £1.5 billion made available, 37,000 annuitants would get 100% compensation via an annual top-up payment for life, with £625 million allocated and indexed at that time for that purpose. As a contingency, in case those individuals lived longer than expected, the Treasury held back £100 million. The rest—£775 million—was allocated to 895,000 non-annuitants via one-off payment, effectively giving them 22.4% of their acknowledged losses. Of that latter group, more than 100,000 people were never traced, contributing to a £24 million underspend of their allocation. In addition, the data shows that the annual compensation payments to annuitants have been running significantly below forecast, by some £54 million from the most recent figures I have seen. That means that the £100 million contingency reserve will never be spent. In total, around £180 million—over 10% of the money allocated to compensate people for their losses—is set to be kept by the Treasury, unless something is done.

The Bill that I propose would require the Treasury to pay the full value of the £1.5 billion allocated for compensation to those affected. In doing so, I would prioritise around 10,000 of the most elderly annuitants who were, in my view, unfairly excluded from compensation

simply because they bought an annuity prior to the Government-imposed cut-off date of September 1992—I have never understood why that date was chosen. The reality is that those annuitants suffered the same consequences as others: reduced pension payments because of maladministration and the failure of prudential regulation. Through campaigning by Members of this House and the Equitable Members Action Group, the Government announced an ex gratia payment to that cohort in 2013, which was welcome in so far as it went.

However, that cohort should be treated the same as other annuitants. According to EMAG, ensuring that would cost around £108 million, after deducting the cost of the ex gratia payments that the cohort received. This group represents the most elderly and vulnerable policyholders. Those who are still alive are in their 80s and 90s. Many will be veterans who served and risked their life for this country, and who we have so recently celebrated and thanked. Many others worked in our national health service and other services. They should be treated fairly, in line with other annuitants. Payments can be calculated simply and quickly. The Government, the Treasury and the Prudential, which took over their policies, know who they are and where they live.

As we might imagine, the people who saved responsibly for their retirement find it difficult to understand why they have not had full redress, when the state has accepted responsibility for the failure that led to their financial losses, which have been calculated and accepted by the state. In the absence of full redress, it must surely be right that the money that has been allocated for compensation actually reaches those affected. It must also be right to prioritise the most elderly and vulnerable. That is what the Bill seeks to do, and I hope that the House will give leave for it to be introduced. It is supported by MPs from six political parties and, I am sure, by many other colleagues.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Bob Blackman, Christine Jardine, Fabian Hamilton, Sir Desmond Swayne, Siân Berry, Jim Shannon, Stephen Flynn and Andrew Rosindell present the Bill.

Bob Blackman accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 July, and to be printed (Bill 242).

Great British Energy Bill

Consideration of Lords message

Clause 3

OBJECTS

3.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 2B in lieu.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment (a) to Lords amendment 2B.

Michael Shanks: I thank all Members of both Houses for their continued scrutiny of this important Bill. In particular, I extend my thanks to my noble Friend the Minister for Energy Security, Lord Hunt of Kings Heath, for his expertise and, dare I say, resilience, which ensured that we reached the resolution that we are here to discuss. Lords amendment 2B was added to the Great British Energy Bill during consideration of Commons amendments, and the Government motion to accept Lords amendment 2B was passed in the other place.

The Great British Energy Bill delivers on our manifesto commitment to establish Great British Energy, which will accelerate clean power deployment, create jobs, boost energy independence and ensure that UK taxpayers, bill payers and communities reap the benefits of clean, secure, home-grown energy. We recognise the breadth of concern across Parliament and from the public on this issue, and particularly on the issue of how Great British Energy will tackle forced labour in its supply chains. Throughout the passage of the Bill, the Government have consistently stated that they wholeheartedly share that concern and agree on the importance of tackling forced labour in supply chains wherever we find it. That is why we tabled Lords amendment 2B, which is the latest move in the Government's work to tackle the issue of forced labour while we progress towards becoming a global leader in clean energy.

We expect all UK businesses to do everything in their power to remove any instances of forced labour from their supply chains, and Great British Energy will be no different—in fact, we have stated many times that we expect it to be a sector leader on this matter. Lords amendment 2B makes it clear that Great British Energy is committed to adopting measures so that it can take the appropriate steps to act on any evidence of forced labour in its supply chains, as we would expect from any responsible company.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I am sure we can rely on the Minister to ensure that no solar panels are installed on British farms that are made by the Chinese Government, using slave labour. I am sure that he can assure us on that point.

Michael Shanks: I have set that out in this debate in a number of ways. We have absolutely committed that Great British Energy will not invest in any supply chains in which there is any evidence of forced labour, and the measures that we are outlining today show how we will deliver that. There is a wider question about forced labour in supply chains for which Great British Energy does not have responsibility, and we have outlined

[*Michael Shanks*]

a number of actions for tackling the issue right across the economy. Just a few weeks ago, I hosted the first cross-Government meeting with colleagues from the Home Office, the Foreign Office and the Department for Business and Trade looking at how we can make regulations much tighter. We want to ensure that what the right hon. Gentleman wants applies across supply chains, not just in the energy space, but across the economy.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister is giving an important speech on a really important topic—a speech that I think everyone across the House will agree with. Does he agree that part of the advantage of having a Government-run GB Energy is that we will have greater control over supply chains, and whether slave labour is being used?

Michael Shanks: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We want Great British Energy to be a sector leader in this area. It must meet all the standards that we expect from every other company, but we want it to go further and really demonstrate what is possible in this space. He raises a wider question about the importance of Great British Energy to delivering investment in the supply chain, so that we are delivering not just energy security through the clean power mission, but good, industrial jobs. That is what this Bill is all about.

Great British Energy will strive to be a leading example of best practice, not just in this space, but right across corporate due diligence, setting a benchmark for ethical standards in supply chain management. That involves ensuring that human rights considerations are integrated into corporate policies, procurement and suppliers' conduct; we will draw on guidance from leading experts in the sector, such as the Helena Kennedy Centre at Sheffield Hallam University.

Lords amendment 2B will strengthen our framework. It demonstrates that both Great British Energy and the Government are absolutely committed to maintaining supply chains that are free from forced labour. I urge the House to agree to Lords amendment 2B and the position that the Government have reached on this critical issue.

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

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): On 25 March, when we last debated amendments to the Bill, the Minister assured us that the mechanisms for preventing modern slavery in supply chains were adequate, and that the Procurement Act 2023 would provide adequate protection against technology that could have been manufactured using slave labour being deployed in the UK. He confirmed that in the coming weeks, he would convene cross-departmental meetings on that matter, and said that a broad strategy would be developed, through work with the solar taskforce and other Government Departments. Then we had the incredible sight of Labour MPs trooping through the Lobby, being whipped to vote against an amendment that would have prevented Great British Energy from investing in supply chains in which links to modern slavery were proven.

The offshoring of our emissions, our manufacturing base and our skilled jobs is understood and acknowledged to be the result of Labour's energy policies, but on that day, we also saw the offshoring of Labour's moral compass. We saw its narrow-minded, ideological obsession with achieving the unachievable: clean power by 2030, at any price and any cost, delivered through solar panels made by slave labour and with coal power in the People's Republic of China.

Following all that, though, a screeching U-turn took place. Literally weeks after the Government whipped their MPs to vote against the modern slavery amendment the last time the Bill was debated, the Government conceded what we all knew to be the case—that the mechanisms cited by the Minister in this House were simply not up to the job. However, we sincerely welcome the acknowledgement that the UK must take a principled stand. The Procurement Act 2023 and the Modern Slavery Act 2015 were groundbreaking when they were introduced, but it is evident that more needs to be done today to prevent goods tainted by slavery from entering UK supply chains.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): As my hon. Friend knows, heaven rejoiceth when a sinner repenteth. Does he share my hope—let us hope it is not naive—that, with this volte-face by Members on the Treasury Bench on this important issue, the cross-party consensus about the seriousness and perniciousness of modern slavery is restored, so that the House can face up to it, whenever and wherever it manifests itself?

Andrew Bowie: I wholeheartedly agree with the sentiments expressed by my hon. Friend. He is absolutely right: over the past decade and more, a cross-party consensus was reached in this House about the pernicious nature of modern slavery and the work we must do together to drive it out of supply chains that could be contributing to, or investing in, the United Kingdom. I think we all believe that we have to achieve that. Now that the Government have acknowledged that the mechanisms in the Bill were not up to the job, as we said at the time, I hope that we can revert to cross-party working on this incredibly important issue.

The transition to clean power must be just, as we have said before and as the Minister has said many times, but it is clear that there is no justice where there is slave labour in supply chains, so we are glad that the Government have listened not just to the official Opposition, but to Members from across both Houses. However, there is a serious question: what does this mean for the clean power 2030 mission? If the route to decarbonisation relies on importing technology from China made with slave labour, surely there should be a rethink of whether that mission is conducive to good policy.

We are pleased that the Minister has rowed back from the position that the Great British Energy Bill needed no extra provisions to exclude slave labour from supply chains, and have accepted an amendment that safeguards against slavery and human trafficking. While we welcome the Government's change of heart, it would be remiss of me not to reiterate for the record that the official Opposition remain resolutely opposed to the creation of Great British Energy, which is not great, not British, and will not produce any energy. The Minister often cites my constituency in Aberdeenshire in these debates

because of the location of GB Energy's headquarters, but I say to him in all sincerity that the people and businesses of north-east Scotland do not want more government. They want government to get out of the way and let them get on with what they do best: extracting oil and gas from the North sea, keeping the lights on and homes warm in our country.

Instead of wasting time on this wasteful vanity project, the Government should lift the ban on licences and work faster on replacing the energy profits levy. That would really create jobs—indeed, it would save jobs—and drive investment in Aberdeen, unlike this Bill. High industrial energy costs are pushing energy-intensive industries such as ceramics and petrochemicals overseas. The impact of those costs is real for industrial communities, and we need to see a real plan that shows that the Government understand that and will act on it.

We are grateful to the Minister for heeding our calls—and, indeed, those of other right hon. and hon. Members—for provisions on slave labour to be included in the Bill, and for listening to the arguments made by Members from all Benches in both Houses. Today, we welcome a small victory, the acceptance of an amendment that seeks to prevent modern slavery in our energy supply chains. That is a positive change to the legislation—legislation that should not exist, but a positive change none the less.

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

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): I rise in strong support of Lords amendment 2B and the consequential amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion). The Liberal Democrats welcome this key step by the Government towards preventing goods linked to Chinese slave labour from being part of our renewables businesses' supply chains. The decision, as we have heard, took time, and it is born of pressure from Members of all political parties and the sheer strength of feeling across both Houses. The Great British Energy Bill needed amending, and we thank the Government for reconsidering.

I want to express in particular my appreciation of Lord Alton of Liverpool's tireless advocacy. Together with Lord Hunt of Kings Heath, the Bill team and colleagues from across both Houses—with important input from the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China—there has been a constructive and cross-party effort to confront an issue that is too often left in the shadows: the scourge of modern slavery in our energy supply chains. Groundbreaking investigative research has helped to shine the necessary light on what is at stake. We have heard irrefutable evidence from the BBC, *The Guardian*, and the world's foremost expert on Uyghur forced labour, Professor Laura Murphy, that forced labour is being used to produce the solar-grade polysilicon that powers most of the global green transition.

4 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I reiterate and support what the hon. Lady and the shadow Minister have said. I understand that this Bill applies to all the regions, including Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. One concern raised with me by my colleagues in the Assembly is slave labour and what is happening to the Uyghur Muslims in particular. The view of the Assembly back home in Northern Ireland—I was a Member of it,

although I am not now, of course—is that this legislation is important, so I welcome what the Government have put in place and thank the hon. Lady for outlining all the people who have contributed to making sure this change happens, including the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief.

Pippa Heylings: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention.

We have to name the report “In Broad Daylight” from Sheffield Hallam University, which found that all solar industry-relevant polysilicon producers in the Uyghur region were either using state-sponsored labour transfers of Uyghurs or were sourcing from companies that were. As we speak, 2.7 million Uyghurs are subject to forced labour and political re-education camps. We cannot allow our green future to be built on the backs of enslaved people. My constituents in South Cambridgeshire do not expect their solar panels to be made by child labourers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or enslaved Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and I do not expect that Ministers do either—and they are right.

I understand that the Government will not be supporting the amendment (a) to Lords amendment 2B, tabled by the hon. Member for Rotherham, which is about definitions. Definitions really matter. The definition of slavery and how it is interpreted needs to be clear. This amendment would make it clear that the definition of slavery includes forced labour, state-imposed forced labour, exploitative child labour, abuses of workers' rights and dangerous working conditions. It would be good to hear from the Minister about how the working groups that he is already working on will ensure that there are no loopholes, no grey areas and no convenient ignorance. The amendment would incorporate and put into practice the International Labour Organisation's definition. How will that ILO standard be put into practice?

We have progress, but it is not the end; it is the beginning. Lord Alton said:

“The Joint Committee on Human Rights is close to completing an inquiry which is likely to call for a comprehensive overhaul of the Modern Slavery Act 2015.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 30 April 2025; Vol. 845, c. 1238.]

This is the opportunity to look seriously at the model set by the United States' Uyghur Forced Labour Prevention Act, which introduces a rebuttable presumption that goods linked to Xinjiang are the product of forced labour, unless clear and convincing evidence can be shown to the contrary. Embedding a similar presumption into UK law would shift the burden of proof away from vulnerable victims and place it firmly on those who profit. It would close those loopholes that have allowed exploitation to flourish unchecked.

As my colleague Earl Russell in the other House rightly noted, we also need international co-ordination. I urge the Minister to update this House on efforts to work with like-minded partners in Europe and elsewhere to eliminate slavery from all our supply chains—those not just of GB Energy, but of all energy companies. Great British Energy, as the Minister said, has a chance to lead by example not just on innovation and independence, but on moral integrity.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Lords amendment 2B resulted from the work of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, which includes cross-party membership from this House.

[*Sir Iain Duncan Smith*]

I see some of its members in the Chamber now. Lord Alton and other members of the alliance, including me, who have been sanctioned by the Chinese Government have worked tirelessly on the amendment, and others have done likewise on other amendments.

Let me say to the Minister that the problem we face at present is that we seem to be attacking this issue piecemeal. When the Conservatives, my own party, were in government, I had a big fight with them to secure a ban on slave-labour-made products in the national health service, and it sits there, in the health service, thanks to cross-party involvement. Now we have a provision in the Great British Energy Bill to block modern slavery, but the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which we helped to enact when I was in the Government, needs to be massively updated in this area because it has no teeth. Unless it is beefed up, what we will have is piecemeal work from officials. If we are to embrace this idea—I know that the Government were tentative about it, but frankly all Governments do this, and the reality is that it has gone through—our objective should be, “How do we make this the case for every single product that is introduced, so that all of Government, including local government, are not allowed to involve themselves in modern-day slavery?” A huge amount of this applies to China, but some of it applies to other countries.

Let me also say to the Minister that this is the beginning, not the end. We must ensure that the lesson that is learned is that we must be paragons of virtue when it comes to modern-day slavery and that we will stand up for those who have no voice. If we go about buying products made through modern slavery, which undercuts the free market dramatically because no salaries are paid, we not only destroy the concept of the free market but cause people to be imprisoned by making our casual purchases.

There are solar arrays all over the country today that contain a modern slavery element—namely, the polysilicon. What are the Government going to do about that? What are they going to do about something that is already in existence in the UK? It is a big question. The Government have only just opened this door, and I think that if they want to stand by moral purpose, which is exactly what a Labour Government would claim to do, they must take this forward. They must say, “Do you know what? We are going to table amendments in all those areas that get rid of this and amend the Modern Slavery Act.” If they do that, they will be right, because this really is the issue of our time. The issue of the cost of products should not outweigh that of the cost of lives.

We have turned a blind eye for far too long, and we must now face up to our responsibilities. America has given us a lead, turning the balance of proof on its head by ensuring that companies make the correct declarations, because they are assumed to have slave labour elements in their products—and those products are not just arrays. Companies have to prove to the Government that their supply chains are clear, and those supply chains are tested using a New Zealand company called Oritain. I suggested its services to the last Government, who were not keen to take them up at that stage, but I offer them to this Government now, because they have to do those tests and force companies to tell the truth, rather than casually saying, “This is what we are told.”

If the Government do that, they will begin to stand up for this one. The Opposition, I am sure, stand ready to assist them in all this, as do all the other parties. This is a real moment, when we, as a Parliament, can say, “That is it. No more backsliding; no more pretence. We will fight modern slavery wherever it exists, because it is a tool of oppression and a tool to break the free market.”

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): Well, this is a red-letter day: we are in the Chamber to discuss something positive that is happening with GB Energy. I commend the Minister and his colleagues for that, although it is consistent with the function of a significant U-turn in Government policy. I thank Members of both Houses for their work in bringing Lords amendment 2B to fruition.

The amendment would ensure that no material or equipment produced as a function of slave labour is used in GB Energy’s enterprises, but I heard the Minister talk about “expectation” and “striving”, which are much less unequivocal than “ensure”, so I would be very grateful if he could reassure the House that “ensure” means ensure. Consistent with comments from other hon. and right hon. Members, there is a very straightforward way to do that. It is maybe not legislatively or bureaucratically light, but this is an extremely important issue. If it does not attract a burden of administration to ensure that our collective consciences are clear, what will?

As an engineer, I know that many products that we purchase come with a certificate of conformity. In pursuance of ensuring that there is no slave labour in any enterprise of GB Energy, it would be very straightforward for the Government to mandate that a certificate of conformity must be produced for all equipment, which would explicitly guarantee that the supply chains are free of slave labour. That does not seem to be an especially demanding expectation.

I will make a final point. Can the Minister explain something to me? I am genuinely not seeing this with the clarity that I suspect he is—or maybe he is not. In what enterprises will GB Energy be involved as the decider, rather than the provider, in delivering generation, transmission or storage capacity on the ground and in a meaningful way? How will GB Energy scrutinise or mandate bills for materials to say whether they are provided from this provider or that provider? That is not my understanding of the nature of GB Energy. As has been explained in this House and elsewhere, GB Energy is a derisking device that will inject capital into the market and clear the blockages—it will not introduce purchase orders from this company or that company. I would be genuinely grateful if the Minister could clarify that.

Michael Shanks: I thank all hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions to this important debate. I will start with the intervention made by the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), which set the tone. He said that there is an important cross-party consensus on this issue, and I think that that has come through in all the contributions we have heard. Hopefully, that gives us a mandate to push further on this issue than any of our parties has done until this point. That is my genuine intent, and the hon. Gentleman’s point is very helpful.

I always welcome my exchanges with the shadow Minister, as he well knows. I thought for a moment that there was an opportunity at this very late stage for him to change his way and support investment in his own constituency through Great British Energy, but he has once again decided to use this opportunity to say to his constituents that he does not want investment and jobs. We will of course remind his constituents of that.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Bring it down to Cornwall!

Michael Shanks: Cornwall is ever present in these debates. Nevertheless, however much the shadow Minister's teeth were gritted, I do welcome his support for the approach we are taking today.

We are debating Lords amendment 2B, which, combined with the previous commitments that I have made from the Dispatch Box and that my noble Friend Lord Hunt has made in the other place, demonstrates that this Government are committed to using Great British Energy as a vehicle for taking this issue seriously. As came through in a number of the contributions, though, this is not solely the preserve of Great British Energy; it is much broader, both in the energy system and in the wider economy.

I have committed to doing some things already. I have committed to appointing a senior leader in Great British Energy who will have oversight of tackling forced labour in the supply chain; we have confirmed that Baroness O'Grady will take on that role. Many Members will know that she has significant experience in this space, and she will bring much effort to important deliberations at GB Energy. I have committed to cross-Government departmental meetings, which took place on 7 May as a starting point. I have committed to including an overarching expectation in the statement of strategic priorities, and that will be delivered within six months. We have demonstrated our unwavering commitment to tackling forced labour in supply chains, and we are resolute in our determination to go further.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: The question, however, is this: at the end of it all, how will we know that the supply chains have been correctly declared? If they have not been, it will become a matter of avoidance. America checks, tests and sanctions companies that have lied about their supply chains, and that has forced wholesale change to its supply chain process. I ask the Government to learn from America and get companies such as Oritain to use forensic science to test the company supply chains about which they are suspicious.

4.15 pm

Michael Shanks: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. I was going to come to his substantive contribution shortly, but I will do so now. The first point he made in his speech is important, which is that there is a real danger with the piecemeal approach he mentioned. That is partly why I have resisted the idea that Great British Energy will solve all of these issues in isolation; it clearly is not going to do so. We think it has a really important role in leading the conversation and leading the effort, and certainly in demonstrating that by its own actions, but we have to look at these issues right across Government.

The meetings I have convened are a starting point in looking seriously at where the Modern Slavery Act falls short. We are committed to doing that, and it sounds as though there is consensus across the House about looking seriously at that. That is not only for my Department, and I want to be careful about overstepping, because to avoid the work being piecemeal, it needs to be done right across Government. However, the points the right hon. Gentleman makes specifically on tracking supply chains are very helpful, and I will take them away.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings) made a point about the International Labour Organisation's principles. Great British Energy will consider the 11 indicators of forced labour, including abuse of working and living conditions, as part of its efforts. I do not think that this Bill is the right place to get into a conversation about defining slavery. We may need to look at that, and I am not against doing so, but this Bill is about creating Great British Energy, and we need to be careful to keep these things separate.

We are already a signatory to a number of conventions, which highlights the Government's broad support for tackling forced and compulsory labour, and we will continue to take that forward. The Home Office has produced a modern slavery action plan, which sets out the first steps in its departmental responsibilities for tackling modern slavery at its root. The plan, which will be published shortly, confirms that the Government are considering legislative vehicles for strengthening section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act.

These are clearly important issues, and I do not for a second seek to say that the Lords amendment or Great British Energy itself will solve all of them, but I think this is an important step, and I welcome all the contributions made across the House.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I basically want to thank the Minister. This has been quite a robust and rough journey, but he has listened to comments from across the House, analysed the arguments we have made and listened to the other place. I think this is now going to be a very strong Act that will help enormously to shift our global supply chains and get the transparency I think everybody in this House wants, so I thank him.

Michael Shanks: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, but more broadly, as I have said before, for her significant contribution in this space and for the way she has influenced me and others over the past few weeks on these important issues. I also thank others across the House, because it has been a real cross-party effort, and I think we are in the same place. We want to take this forward, and there is much more work to do. I want the message to be that, while this is progress, it is—as the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) put it very well—the beginning, and certainly not the end, of further work.

Without wanting to tempt fate, this is the last opportunity to speak about the Bill in this place, so I close by thanking everyone who has played a role in getting it to this stage. In particular, I thank my noble Friend Lord Hunt in the other place. I thank all the Members from all parties in this place who contributed to the Bill Committee, and the witnesses who gave evidence. I also thank the parliamentary staff who play such an important role in

[Michael Shanks]

shepherding Bills through this place and the House of Lords. I especially thank the fantastic team of officials in the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, who moved at incredible speed to develop the legislation, but always with good humour, which I have personally appreciated.

Great British Energy is at the heart of what the Government are setting out to achieve: delivering clean power, but delivering jobs and investment as we do it; and delivering energy security and climate leadership, owned by and for the people of this country, and headquartered in the energy capital of Europe, Aberdeen. With investments having already been made, including in community energy in Scotland today, which Members from Scotland might welcome, and investment in supply chains and much, much more, this is the big idea of our time. It will deliver on our energy objectives, but with the public owning a stake in their energy future. I am pleased that Parliament will—I hope, without tempting fate—back it today, so that it can receive Royal Assent and get on with doing what we need it to do.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I just want to remind the House that the Deputy Speaker in the Chair today is also sanctioned by the Chinese Government for her bravery.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): That is noted, and no doubt on the record again, as it has been previously. Thank you. I will continue with the business.

Lords amendment 2B agreed to.

DATA (USE AND ACCESS) BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Data (Use and Access) Bill [Lords] for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 12 February 2025 (Data (Use and Access) Bill [Lords]: Programme):

Consideration of Lords Message

(1) Proceedings on the Lords Message shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after their commencement.

Subsequent stages

(2) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(3) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(Kate Dearden.)

Question agreed to.

Data (Use and Access) Bill [Lords]

Consideration of Lords message

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I must draw the House's attention to the fact that Lords amendment 49B, the Lords disagreement with the Commons in Commons amendment 52 and Lords amendments 52B and 52C engage Commons financial privilege. If any of those Lords amendments are agreed to, I will cause the customary entry waiving Commons financial privilege to be entered in the *Journal*.

Clause 28

DVS TRUST FRAMEWORK

4.22 pm

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): I beg to move,

That this House insists on Commons Amendment 32 to which the Lords have disagreed and disagrees with the Lords in their Amendments 32B and 32C proposed to the words restored to the Bill by the Lords disagreement.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following Government motions:

That this House agrees with the Lords in their Amendments 34B and 34C proposed instead of the words left out of the Bill by Commons Amendment 34.

That this House disagrees with the Lords in their Amendment 43B.

That this House disagrees with the Lords in their Amendment 49B.

That this House insists on Commons Amendment 52 to which the Lords have disagreed and disagrees with the Lords in their Amendments 52B and 52C proposed to the words restored to the Bill by the Lords disagreement.

That this House does not insist on Commons Amendment 55 to which the Lords have disagreed and agrees with the Lords in their Amendments 55D and 55E proposed in lieu of Commons Amendment 55.

That this House agrees with the Lords in their Amendment 56B

Chris Bryant: Notwithstanding the views of the Chinese Government, it is a delight to see you in your place, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am only saddened that I have not been sanctioned, which feels a shame—nor by Russia, for that matter. There is still time.

I am delighted to be here today to discuss the Bill, which we last discussed in depth a week ago today. First, I would like to express how pleased I am that the other place has agreed to the Government's amendments relating the national underground asset register and intimate image abuse. I pay tribute to all those Members of the House of Lords who took part in getting that part of the legislation to the place where it is now. I am glad we have been able to work with them. I will start by encouraging the House to agree to those amendments, before I move on to discuss the amendments relating to AI and intellectual property, scientific research, and sex and gender—in that order.

Lords amendments 55D, 55E and 56B, which were introduced to the Bill in the other place by the noble Baroness Owen of Alderley Edge, place a duty on the face of the Bill that requires the Government to: review the operation of the “reasonable excuse” defence in the offences of creating and requesting intimate image deepfakes without consent, or reasonable belief in consent; publish the outcome of the review in a report; and lay that report before Parliament. The Government were pleased

to support the amendments in the other place, as we share the desire to ensure that the criminal law, and these offences in particular, work as the Government intend.

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): I think we all appreciate the amendment, because we want to protect vulnerable women, children and anybody who is at risk of this sort of harm. Could we not look at doing something similar to the amendment, and the carve-out we have created with it, for our creative industries? If we can protect our vulnerable people, can we not also protect our creative industries from copyright infringement by having territorial exemptions similar to what we have with deepfakes?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend is jumping the gun slightly—I will come on to those issues.

I want to praise Baroness Owen with regard to this part of the legislation. If it had not been for her, I do not think it would have ended up in the Bill. There was a bit of to-ing and fro-ing between her and the Ministry of Justice to ensure that we got the legislation in the right place. As I said in last week's discussions, one of the issues was whether Baroness Owen's original version of the second offence really worked in law; I think she agreed that our version, which we tabled in Committee, was better. We have been able to tidy up the question of the reasonable excuse. It is perfectly legitimate to ask how on earth there could be a legitimate or reasonable excuse for creating one of these images or asking for one to be created, and we went through those debates previously. I am glad that the Government have come to a settled position with Baroness Owen, and that is what I urge everybody to support here today.

The Government made a manifesto commitment to ban sexually explicit deepfakes, and the Bill delivers on that promise. For the first time, there will be punishment for perpetrators who create or ask others to create intimate deepfakes of adults without consent.

Secondly, I turn to the national underground asset register, which it does feel has been a long time coming. Of course, that is partly because the Bill is in its third iteration. Amendment 34 relates to the national underground asset register. An amendment was previously tabled in the House of Lords requiring the Secretary of State to provide guidance on cyber-security measures, which was rejected by this House. Last week, the Government tabled amendments 34B and 34C in lieu on this topic, which were drafted with the support of the security services. These amendments expand the scope from cyber-security only to general security measures, clarify the audience for the guidance and extend its reach to Northern Ireland, alongside England and Wales.

On all the amendments I have spoken to thus far, I thank our noble colleagues in the other place for their work and support to reach agreement in these areas. I urge colleagues here today to support these amendments, too; otherwise, we are never going to get the Bill through.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: On the subject of never getting the Bill through, I will, of course, give way to the right hon. Gentleman.

Steve Barclay: One reason for getting the Bill through, one would hope, is to deliver on things like content credentials, which firms like Adobe have championed, to show who has produced a file, where the ownership sits and whether artificial intelligence has been used to edit it. Can the Minister confirm whether the Bill will deliver on that commitment on content credentials, and if not, why not?

Chris Bryant: Well, it is because the Bill was never intended to deal with copyright and artificial intelligence at all. The Government have not introduced any provision relating to AI or copyright, and I think that specific issue would probably be ruled out of scope if it were to be tabled.

There are very serious issues in relation to AI and copyright, which I am about to come on to, and I know the point the right hon. Gentleman is making on technical standards. *[Interruption.]* He keeps on talking at me—I am happy to give way to him again if he wants, but I cannot hear what he is saying.

Steve Barclay: My point is about AI being used to change photographs, and having the ability to see that through content credentials or the digital fingerprint. The point I am raising is that the Government themselves have still not adopted that, in terms of their official communications. Will the Bill deliver on that, and if not, why will the Government not adopt that best practice?

Chris Bryant: I am honestly failing to understand the point the right hon. Gentleman is making. The Bill is not and has never been intended to deal with the kind of issue he is referring to. As I say, I think that if somebody were to table amendments to that effect, they would be ruled out of order. The Bill does not deal with copyright or artificial intelligence; the only measures in the Bill on AI and copyright are those introduced in the House of Lords, which I am about to speak to.

Although I was not able to listen to the whole of the debate in the House of Lords the other day, the Secretary of State and I stood at the Bar of the House to listen carefully to considerable parts of the debate. I want to make two separate but interconnected points on AI and intellectual property in relation to the Bill. First, there is an urgent issue that must be addressed—namely, what is happening today, and, for that matter, one could argue what happened yesterday, last week, last year and two years ago. To be absolutely clear, I will reiterate that copyright law in the UK is unchanged. Works are protected unless one of the existing exceptions, which have existed for some time, such as exceptions for teaching and research, applies, or the rights holder has granted permission for their work to be used. That is the law. That is the law now, and it will be the law tomorrow if the House agrees with the Government and rejects the amendment tabled by Baroness Kidron and supported in the House of Lords. As I have said previously, I am glad that several creative industries have been able to secure licensing agreements with AI companies, including publishers, music labels and others, under the existing law. I want to see more of that—more licensing and more remuneration of creative rights holders.

4.30 pm

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): It is wonderful to hear my hon. Friend talk about the importance of copyright and the fact that we have existing laws that we can use, but I wonder whether he is aware of the growing concern in industry about the risk of expansive US-style fair use principles creeping into UK practice and what we might do to secure our safeguards. We must not allow foreign interpretations of fair use to erode our copyright laws.

Chris Bryant: As I am sure my hon. Friend is aware, the US system of fair use is different from the UK's—ours goes back to 1709, with the first of our copyright Acts, and it has been very solid. When we introduced this Bill, I said that this country should be proud of the fact that a succession of different generations have ensured that rights holders can protect their copyright. Interestingly, one of Charles Dickens' big battles was being able to protect his copyright not only in the UK but in the United States of America, where he felt he had fewer protections. It is for us to develop our own copyright law in our own country, and I say to my hon. Friend that the law as it is will not change one jot as a result of what we are intending to do in the Bill.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con) *rose—*

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

Chris Bryant: I probably ought to give way first to the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, and then to the hon. Gentleman.

Dame Caroline Dinenage: Yesterday the Minister appeared before our Select Committee and said, “The best kind of AI is the kind of AI that is built on premium content, and you can't get premium content without paying for premium content.” Now, as well as being concerned about the overuse of the expression “premium content” in that sentence, I am also concerned about the fact that, as we speak, there are copyright works out there being scraped underhandedly by AI developers, some of whom are feigning licensing negotiations with the very rights holders whose works they are scraping. Surely now is the time to require developers to tell us what copyright works are being used to train their models and what their web-scraping bots are up to. Surely he agrees that Lords amendment 49 is a very good way to move this forward to see what works are being used to train AI models.

Chris Bryant: The first thing to say to the right hon. Lady is that I completely stand by everything I said to the Select Committee yesterday. I do believe that the best form of AI will be intelligent artificial intelligence. And just like any pipe, what comes out of it depends on what goes into it. If we have high-quality data going into AI, then it will produce high-quality data at the other end. I have spoken to quite a lot of publishing houses in the UK, including Taylor & Francis in particular—

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab) *rose—*

Chris Bryant: Let me finish my point and then I will give way first to the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart), who gets very cross if people queue-barge.

I am aware that there are quite a lot of publishing houses in the UK that are determined to secure licensing deals with AI companies, both in the UK and overseas. First, they want to ensure that those AI companies remunerate them and, secondly, they want to ensure that they have very high-quality, up-to-date information and data going into them, so that if somebody searches for immunotherapy, for instance, they will have the latest information on immunotherapy, not stuff that is five, six or seven years out of date, or that may have come from a dodgy source.

The second point I want to make is this. The right hon. Lady said that this amendment would sort the problem today, but it would not. It would do nothing today, or indeed for a considerable number of months. Therefore, there is an issue about what we do today—what we as a Government do, and what we as the creative industries and everybody working together do, to ensure that we protect copyright under the existing law as it is today.

Pete Wishart: The Minister keeps saying that we have existing copyright laws that are there to protect the creative industries and our artists, but practically our whole creative heritage is being scraped. There are probably songs in the top 40 that have been totally designed by AI, and there will be books in the top 30 or 40 bestsellers that will be based on AI—probably fully AI. This is happening right now. Surely artists and creators should know when their works are being used. That is why Lords amendment 49B is so important for transparency.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that there are works out there that have been created with the use of AI. As I have said several times, I have never thought that the creative industries are in any sense luddite; I have always thought that they are at the forefront of innovation in so many areas—at the Select Committee yesterday I referred to Fra Angelico. This is true of every creative industry: they have to innovate in order to succeed. A video games company would say that it is using AI all the time, not necessarily to save money but to improve the product and be at the cutting edge of what they are doing. Even Björn from ABBA has said that he has been using AI because it enhances his work.

One area that is in our consultation but is yet to be addressed by anybody in any of the debates I have heard in this House or the other place is this: what we do about the copyright status of works that are solely or largely created by AI, because it is a moot point what we should do about it under existing law? My point is simply that we need to address all these issues in the round rather than piecemeal, and I will come on to that in more substance in a moment.

Jonathan Davies: The Minister is being very generous with his time. Central to what he is saying is transparency. Does he agree that enforceable transparency obligations would reduce legal uncertainty, deter infringement by increasing the legal risk to AI developers, and enable faster redress by allowing the courts to establish precedent where copyright is breached?

Chris Bryant: Yes. I do not think that people should breach copyright law. I have said that in several debates, and it is the settled view of the Government. We believe that people should not breach copyright law—they should not break the law. Some of the issues my hon. Friend raises have been or are being tested in the courts, and they will be contested more in the courts in future months.

A point I made right at the beginning, when we introduced the consultation, was that there is a fair use system in the United States of America, while we have our system in the UK, and then there is a slightly different system in the EU, which has largely relied on the Napoleonic code understanding of what an author is and what a work is. All those systems are slightly different and have been implemented in different countries in different ways, and they may lead to different conclusions in individual court cases.

That is why we have wanted to look at every single element of this issue, from transparency to technical data, access to high-quality data, issues of enforcement and personality rights. There are a whole series of issues, many of which are yet to be addressed in debates in either Chamber. That takes me back to my point that I do not think this is the Bill in which to do this piece of work, and I do not think that the amendment we are debating will secure what people hope from it.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): The Minister mentioned the consultation. Could he confirm that the Government no longer consider an opt-out model to be their preferred approach to copyright and AI, and if so, what alternative approach is now being actively pursued or developed with the sector?

Chris Bryant: I will say two things. First, we have always said that we were consulting on a package, and part of that package was a technical solution so that rights holders would be able to protect their rights better, in a way that—

Samantha Niblett: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: I will in a moment, but I am still answering the intervention. I had two points to make, and I will now probably forget the second one.

As I was saying, it was always going to be a package of measures, and we always said that we would not introduce that package unless we were secure in the belief that we could deliver for the creative industries a technical solution that made it simpler for them to enforce their rights and seek remuneration and that would lead to more licensing. That is a whole package.

When we last debated this, I said two things: first, that we are open-minded about where we are in relation to the consultation, and secondly—perhaps just as importantly—that our amendment 16 would require us to undertake an economic impact assessment of all the different options included in the consultation. I hope that answers my hon. Friend's question. Somebody else wanted to ask another question.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab) *rose*—

Samantha Niblett *rose*—

Chris Bryant: I think it was my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley) and then I will probably go over to my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton).

Anneliese Midgley (Knowsley) (Lab): The other week, an *Observer* article reported that a source close to the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology said that

“proposals to introduce an opt-out system of copyright rules was no longer his preferred option but one of several being given consideration.”

That is a very welcome change of heart, potentially, but it does not mean anything unless Ministers are prepared to repeat it in Parliament. Will my hon. Friend the Minister confirm that that is an accurate representation of the Government's position?

Chris Bryant: I am afraid that I will repeat what I just said. First, in the consultation we introduced a package of measures and it hinged on the issue of whether we can deliver not only for AI companies but for the creative industries, to protect their rights more effectively than they presently can. Secondly, as I think I have now said twice at the Dispatch Box, we are open-minded about the responses to the consultation. We have had 11,500 responses to the consultation and we are making our way through all that. A lot of different issues have been addressed.

The issue of the economic impact assessment is a serious one. It is one thing to say that the AI sector in the UK, which is the third largest in the world, is worth x billion pounds to the UK economy, and that the creative industries are worth £124 billion—that is a number that a lot of people have used—to the economy. It is quite a different matter to draw up a proper economic impact assessment on the basis of the various different options.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: I am afraid the hon. Gentleman is in a queue. It is quite a long queue, and it seems to be getting longer.

Torcuil Crichton: I thank the Minister for—

Chris Bryant: No, no. I think my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Samantha Niblett) is next.

Samantha Niblett: On the point of finding a solution in the round, if no credible technical solution is in sight, will the Minister confirm what non-technical legislative or regulatory measures the Government are considering to protect rights holders in the interim?

Chris Bryant: That is precisely why we need to do this in the round, rather than just piecemeal. I understand the attraction of what is on the amendment paper today, but I do not think it would deliver the answer that the people need now to the issues that the creative industries are facing now. In another debate we referred to the issue—

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Chris Bryant: Hang on! Madam Deputy Speaker, we will have to set up a queuing system.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): The Minister is very popular.

Chris Bryant: I am not sure that it is popularity, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The important point is that we need to look at this in the round, rather than piecemeal. I do not think that what is on the amendment paper today would deliver anything now. Indeed, it does not purport to; it instead purports to give something in six, nine or 12 months' time, or sometime in the future.

Torcuil Crichton: We can assure the Minister that he remains popular, as well as generous with his time. He mentioned the Government consultation. It has caused deep and sustained anxiety across the sector. When can we expect a substantive response to the consultation?

Chris Bryant: I wish I could give my hon. Friend a timeline. The main thing I want to say about the timeline, as somebody who I think all hon. Members know cares passionately not just about the anxiety that has been created in this sphere because of the consultation but about the anxiety for many creative people about their future careers, is that I get that anxiety—100%. That is the bigger point.

Frankly, I would like to stop doing the Data Bill and start going out and engaging with the Minister for AI and Digital Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark), to have as many sessions with creative industries and different parts of the sector and with the AI companies—in particular UK-based AI companies—to work out how we can get to proper solutions to all of this. However, until I get the Data Bill out of the way, I will struggle to do that.

On another point, I think of my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley as a musician, because she is still a member of the Musicians' Union. There is a really important part here for the different sectors within the creative industries. Word, image, music and sound will all probably need different technical solutions. That is the kind of nitty-gritty that we need to get into, which we can only really do when we consider the whole issue in the round, rather than just one specific aspect of it. Now, I think Margate calls.

Ms Billington: I thank the Minister for giving way; he is being extremely generous with his time.

The Minister is talking about the possibility that the amendments put forward would not do anything today, but there is an urgency in the creative industries because the stuff that they create is being scraped now. Will he prioritise transparency by committing at the Dispatch Box to introducing enforceable obligations, if not through a statutory instrument then at least through a clear public commitment, so that transparency will be central to the Government's approach to AI and copyright?

4.45 pm

Chris Bryant: First, I completely get the urgency of this. In many ways, I wish we had been addressing this two or three years ago, because we are some way behind other countries in relation to this. Secondly, we will prioritise the issue of transparency in all the work we do as we go forward. I have said that from the very beginning. Transparency is essential to the issue of licensing; licensing is essential to the question of remuneration; and remuneration is essential to the process of AI being high-quality, effective and able to be deployed in the UK. All these things have to be addressed in the round and together, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that without transparency, it is worth nothing.

The AI Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North—is chuntering in my left ear, which is helpful because she makes the point that this was the very first thing we discussed when came into office. With both of us in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, we discussed how we could get to a resolute piece of legislation that enabled greater licensing, greater deployment of artificial intelligence in the UK, in particular UK companies, and greater transparency. So I completely agree on that—

Ms Billington *rose*—

Chris Bryant: I will give way, but I have the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) waiting.

Ms Billington: Again, my hon. Friend is extremely generous with his time. Will he therefore consider interim measures or guidance that would deliver similar outcomes while legislative options are being explored? That is what the creative industries are looking for.

Chris Bryant: I do not know what interim measures would look like. All three of us on the team, including the Secretary of State, have often said that we are open-minded about anybody coming through the door with a good solution. We are in the business of good ideas, and if anybody has any good ideas, we are happy to look at them, but I honestly cannot make the guarantee that my hon. Friend asks for because I do not know what interim measures that were not legislative would look like. It is not our intention—I would urge people to abide by this—to legislate piecemeal in this Bill, which is not about artificial intelligence and copyright.

Mike Martin *rose*—

Chris Bryant: Of course I will give way to the hon. Gentleman. I am sorry he has been waiting so long.

Mike Martin: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way; he is being very generous, although I might suggest that he works on his queuing system a little bit.

I understand that the timetable issue is a difficult one, and most things seem to be arriving in the spring with this Government, but could we talk about the format? Are we going to have the consultation, then a White Paper and then a Bill? Is that what it is going to look like? Will that perhaps be in the next King's Speech?

Chris Bryant: If I was unable to suggest what interim measures would look like, I am not sure I will be able to please the hon. Gentleman by suggesting what will be in the next King's Speech. I do not even know when the next King's Speech will be. As the Minister for the creative industries and for data, I want, along with my colleagues in Government, to be able to get on with the business of trying to get together the working parties I have referred to. I want to get people from the AI companies and the creative industries sitting around the same table to work out what a proportionate and effective system of transparency would look like and what the technical solutions might be. Other countries have struggled with drawing this up; the EU is struggling with it at the moment.

That is the next stage. At the same time, we are considering what our response to the consultation should be. We have heard what many people in this House and in the House of Lords have said on this issue, and of course we will bear all that in mind. We are keeping an open mind in relation to that. I cannot give the hon. Gentleman a date for when we will publish that consultation, but we are working on it as fast as we possibly can.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend told our Select Committee yesterday that it is not for us to give away the labour of other people to third parties for free. Given that the Government have now said they are open-minded, and if open-minded means there is no technical solution, is the Minister open-minded to the idea of legislative solutions to protect copyright and enhance it for all our great creatives? It is not just ABBA's Björn; it is people in Rochdale and low-paid creatives across the whole north-west and country.

Chris Bryant: One of the special and unique aspects of the creative industries as a sector, which has grown faster than the rest of the UK economy and for whom we hope to lay out our plan in the next few weeks in the creative industries industrial strategy, is that they exist in nearly every part of our land. Often, the jobs are not well remunerated, and we want to change that. That is a key part of what we seek to do. We also want to ensure that more people can come into the creative industries and realise their ambitions in those areas, and they will not be able to do that if they are not remunerated. That is why I have made the point from the beginning that we want to get to a technical solution, which is not far distant. It is a possibility—I would not deride it. It does not exist at the moment, but there are those who want to work on it. Frankly, somebody might earn a decent penny if they were to come up with a solution so that all rights holders would be able easily, simply and without great expense to protect their rights across all AI platforms deployed in the UK.

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con)
rose—

Mr James Frith (Bury North) (Lab) *rose—*

Chris Bryant: Oh my Lord—I am almost as keen to get on to the next bit of my speech as I am to get the data Bill through to Royal Assent, but I probably ought to give way to the right hon. Lady and then I will come back to my hon. Friend.

Dame Karen Bradley: I am so grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I get the sense that he is perhaps needing to go long, and that might be why he is taking so many interventions—I am happy to assist him in that process. I want to give him an opportunity. I know him well enough and know how much he values this place, but I have been slightly concerned by his comments throughout that he is keen to get on with it. Would he like to put on the record that he is first and foremost a parliamentarian and that being in this place is the bit of the job that he values most?

Chris Bryant: Well, the right hon. Lady was at my 60th birthday—I know it is difficult to believe.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): A long time ago!

Chris Bryant: “A long time ago!” says the rather ungenerous Member sitting at the back.

Honestly, I have not been asked to go long. I am simply, because I do believe in parliamentary scrutiny, trying to answer all the questions and engage in a proper debate. I know that colleagues want to press me on a series of issues. There are some issues coming up that they might want to press me on that are completely different from this, and I am happy to be pressed, including by the right hon. Lady, as many times as she wants. But I do not think there was a question in her point. She thought she was trying to help me go long, but I am trying to go slightly shorter.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): To help the Minister for a moment, because colleagues are looking bewildered: I do not know who was or was not invited to the Minister's 60th birthday party, in case they are feeling a little left out.

Chris Bryant: I know it is out of order to say that an hon. Member is not telling the truth, but, Madam Deputy Speaker, you were there! [*Laughter.*] And I accept your apology.

Mr Frith: The hon. Gentleman has been generous with his time today and in the process to date, and I thank him for that. I understand the Government have long maintained that this Bill is not the right place for these amendments. Given the Government's anticipated removal of the Lords amendments and the use of financial privilege, what definitive action will the Minister take to address the ongoing serious concerns of our world-leading creative industries, particularly on copyright and transparency? What does he advise those of us seeking stronger commitments to do next? Would he point to any specific timeline, mechanism or legislative tool that will be used to offer the certainty that the sector is crying out for?

Chris Bryant: Notwithstanding the hilarity, this is obviously a very important matter to a large number of people. For many people in the creative industry, it feels like a kind of apocalyptic moment—they think that their careers are disappearing in front of their faces. I fully recognise that.

The moment that the Bill is out of the way, I and the two Departments I sit in—the Departments for Culture, Media and Sport and for Science, Innovation

[Chris Bryant]

and Technology—would like to get people back in to work on two working parties. One would work on transparency and precisely what it looks like in granular detail—very high-level stuff does not really meet the moment. The second would work on technical standards and solutions that might deliver greater access to data for the AI companies, and on the ability for the creative industries to protect their works.

I do have some sympathy with Lords amendment 49B. There is one element that I would like to explore, which has been raised by the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart). It is one thing for Getty Images, for example, to go to court and protect its rights under the existing law, because it has deep pockets and can engage lawyers. It is quite a different matter for individual artists, who may want to promote their work by putting it on the internet and do not want it to disappear from the internet, but also do not want it to be scraped and turned into another version of their work created by AI.

Simon Hoare: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: I will in a second. Then I probably ought to move on to the next subject, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: Oh dear.

I take very seriously the point that this is not just about people with deep pockets; it is also about individual artists. We want to ensure that they are protected. I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Simon Hoare: There is little doubt that the Minister takes the issue seriously—I think the House accepts that—but does he acknowledge that what he has said in answer to questions from the Opposition and from his hon. Friends will offer the sector rather cold comfort? He recognises that this is an issue, as the Government do, and argues that the Bill is not the place to resolve it, but he does not give strong leadership by setting out a clear timetable and a clear direction of travel or sharing with the House his thinking on how the issue could be solved. Many people are facing this problem today, and he is asking them to take comfort from his intention to do something at an unspecified time, with the exception of convening two working parties. It is not quite enough to meet the magnitude of the concern from that vibrant and growing sector, which, as he rightly says, is represented in all constituencies across the country.

Chris Bryant: Of course, I would like to be able to move faster, but as the hon. Gentleman said to me last week in Committee and in various different places, this is not an easy knot to untie. It will require a great deal of goodwill from a large number of people to secure a settled outcome that works for everybody. I still believe that there could be a win-win situation, but that will happen only if we can gather everybody around the same table in order to deliver it. I am perfectly happy to provide leadership, and to be punched in the nose for

providing that leadership if people think that I have got it wrong, but I do not think that is the problem at this particular moment.

Let me give the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) one reason why I think Lords amendment 49B does not really work. Yes, we all agree that we should introduce transparency measures—although it is difficult to work out precisely how they would be proportionate and effective and work equally for big and small companies—but there is no point in having transparency measures unless we have an enforcement measure. An element of the proposed new clause refers to enforcement, but it basically asks the Secretary of State to draw up that enforcement. One would not expect to be able to do that in any other area without a full Bill devoted solely to that purpose. I wish that I could move faster, but I do not want to move faster than is required to secure an outcome.

Chi Onwurah *rose*—

Mr Frith *rose*—

Chris Bryant: I will take only one more intervention, I am afraid, because I have taken so many. I probably ought to give way to the Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the Minister for his generosity in giving way, which has made this a real debate. I commend him for his determination to bring together the tech sector and creatives to develop a solution—I know that many creatives are technical, and many technical people are creative. May I urge the Minister to ensure that he works with a wide range of tech companies? As I have said to him, I do not believe that large tech platforms have the right incentives to develop an appropriate tech solution to this, and I urge him to be transparent about how he engages with them.

Finally, the tech platforms refused to appear at a joint sitting of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee and the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, but it is through transparency that we can ensure competition to identify the best technical solution.

5 pm

Chris Bryant: Yes, I completely agree. My hon. Friend makes the good point that in the UK, many of the creative industries—roughly 40%—are tech. They are fast-growing, and part of what we want to incentivise. She makes the good point that we need to talk to lots of different kinds of artificial intelligence companies, just as we need to talk to lots of different kinds of creative industries. All those points are well made, and what she refers to is precisely the work that I and the team will want to take forward as soon as we can.

Mr Frith: This will be my last intervention for now. Will the Minister make it his policy to include representatives of the creative industries on the technical committees that are working on AI and copyright reform? We arrived at this point because there is a sense that one Department speaks to some people, and another Department speaks to others, whereas there are implications for both sectors. We should have both sectors in the room, talking about each other with the Minister and his Department.

Chris Bryant: I completely agree with everything my hon. Friend said, and I can give that guarantee. Interestingly, when we started this process after the general election, the first consultation meetings that the Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark), and I had were with the creative industries in one room and the AI companies in another. Perhaps it would have been better to mix them up in the way my hon. Friend has suggested, and that is precisely the job of work that I want to get on with.

We are determined that wherever we can, we will take creative industries with us, and we will be transparent about the work that we do. I want to lay to rest the idea that there are two Departments at war with one another. That simply is not the case. The two Departments are trying to work together to achieve good outcomes for everybody.

Dame Caroline Dinenage: The Minister is being unbelievably generous in taking interventions, but before he moves on, I wanted to say that it is really important to have those involved in AI and in the creative industries in the same room at the same time. He must not forget that the reason the creative industries are in such a state of panic and despair about this is because a hare was set running a few months ago by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, when it published an AI strategy that said that the copyright opt-out was a way to grow the AI industry. The Government then published their consultation, in which they indicated that the opt-out was their preferred mechanism, despite the fact that the document also mentioned prioritising transparency. I understand that, but the Minister must understand that panic has set in. Words matter; what we say matters. He needs to do everything that he can to bring this issue to a close.

Chris Bryant: As the hon. Lady knows, I am sympathetic to the direction of travel that she is trying to take me in. Some people will think that I am splitting hairs, and that is not my intention, but I have been keen to avoid the term “opt-out”. As I said, we have brought forward a package of measures. They were reliant on our being able to deliver greater control, through technical measures, for the creative industries and others who had rights to protect. That is why we referred to “rights reservation”, rather than “opt-out”. I take her point, and I am sure that we will be debating it for some considerable time. She is a Select Committee Chair, as is my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Chi Onwurah). I should have said earlier that when I was Chair of the Committee of Privileges, we produced a report, which has yet to be implemented or even discussed in the House, about how we could ensure that witnesses appeared before Parliament when Select Committee Chairs wanted them to.

If it is all right with the rest of the House, I will move on to further subjects. The issues around scientific research—I can never work out where the emphasis lies when I say the word “research”—are embodied in Lords amendment 43B. Some people have suggested that the Bill will somehow create a wild west for research, but that is simply not true. The Bill does not change the threshold for what constitutes scientific research; we are sticking with what has been and is a fair, clear and

proportionate measure, using the “reasonableness test” that is common in other legislation and well known by the courts.

As Lord Vallance said in the House of Lords earlier this week, this amendment would go against the good work done by the previous Government on avoiding unnecessary red tape for researchers. We have a world-class research sector in the UK. We want to empower it, not tie it up in red tape. We believe that documents such as the Frascati manual, which are useful and interesting in other settings, are not designed to contain legally binding requirements, so the amendment is misplaced.

If the amendment were carried forward, researchers would need to be able to demonstrate their work’s creativity to a legal standard. If someone’s work is aimed at testing or reproducing another researcher’s results, is it truly creative? That is a legitimate question, but it takes on a whole new meaning, and brings a whole new layer of bureaucracy, when enforced to a new legal standard, as the Bill insists, backed up by the potential for huge regulatory fines.

Similar issues arise in relation to requirements for research to be “systematic” and “ethical”. Those words are not necessarily well known in the courts when it comes to this legislation. As Lord Winston argued powerfully on Monday, if the amendment had been law 50 years ago, we may never have had in vitro fertilisation and the benefits spinning off from that, including valuable cancer research. Those are the issues caused by putting such a test in a legally binding setting that it was never designed for.

Chi Onwurah: On the point that Lord Winston made in the other place, will the Minister explain how setting a test for scientific research, so that data could be reused, would have prevented in vitro fertilisation?

Chris Bryant: Lord Winston’s point is that by introducing a requirement that research be systematic, ethical and creative, we are creating a whole new idea of what constitutes research. When he wanted to start his IVF work, it was generally thought that it would be unethical to explore that territory. Today, we would consider that view to be misplaced. We believe that the task of deciding what counts as scientific research is best approached by drawing on guidance and the opinion of experts. That is what the reasonableness test allows. It is a concept that is well understood by the courts. While I sympathise with the intention, expressed in the other place, of guarding against misuse, and while I understand the issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West and I have discussed on several occasions, the Government believe that the amendment is unnecessary as the Bill already contains sufficient and, I would argue, considerable safeguards.

A controller who wishes to change the purpose of data processing to scientific research must first ensure that they comply with clause 71’s rules on purpose limitation. Scientific research is not listed as grounds for exemption where data was collected on the basis of consent. Secondly, the controller would have to ensure that they passed a “reasonableness” test; thirdly, they would have to ensure that they had lawful basis; fourthly, they would have to ensure that they met the requirements of the safeguards in clause 86; and fifthly, they would have to ensure that the new processing was fair and

[Chris Bryant]

complied with the wider data protection principles in UK GDPR. That is a very substantial set of safeguards. The Government cannot see how the Lords amendment would add value, on top of all those requirements against misuse, but it would have an effect on genuine researchers, as I have set out, burdening them with red tape and uncertainty and potentially excluding important research.

Chi Onwurah: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: If my hon. Friend does not mind, I will not give way again. I will sum up at the end of the debate, so if she wants to raise issues again, I will take interventions then. [Interruption.] I think you would like me to get a move on, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I turn finally to the issue of sex and gender, particularly in the context of the measures on digital verification services. I have tabled amendments to remove the measure that was voted for in the House of Lords on Monday, for reasons that Lord Vallance and I have noted in previous debates. For clarity, the data accuracy principle requires personal data to be accurate and not misleading for the purpose for which it is being used. That safeguard should ensure that personal data shared by public authorities with digital verification services for the purposes of verifying a particular attribute appropriately confirms the specific attribute in question. Public authorities and digital verification service providers are legally required to comply with that principle at different stages of the digital verification process. As I said last week, although it is very unlikely that digital verification services will be used in the kind of cases raised by Opposition Members, the provisions mean that if an organisation requests verification of a person's sex at birth, the public authority must not share data that records gender more widely for the purpose of that check. Likewise, digital verification service providers must not rely on data that records gender more widely as part of the verification process in that scenario.

This Government recognise that there are instances where sex and gender data appear in the same field in public authority data sets. Existing legislation requires personal data to be accurate for the purpose for which it is being used, which means that personal data processed as part of digital verification checks must reflect the specific requirements of that check. I assure the House that if the Government were to identify an instance in which a public authority was sharing with digital verification services gender data that was mislabelled as biological sex data, we would respond appropriately.

To reiterate, this Government consider the issue of data accuracy to be of importance, and accept the Supreme Court ruling. That judgment and its effects must be worked through holistically, with sensitivity and in line with the law. The Government are already undertaking extensive work on data standards and data accuracy that will consider upcoming updated guidance from the equalities regulator. I do not think it would be appropriate to legislate in the way proposed without having taken those steps, particularly given the sensitive nature of this matter and the potential impact on people's privacy and human rights.

I finish by noting your opinion, Madam Deputy Speaker, that Lords amendments 49B, 52B and 52C engage the financial privilege of this House, which the Government do not believe it is appropriate for this House to waive. I am sure that the other place will reflect on that carefully during its further consideration of the Bill. I am grateful to all those Members who intervened, and I hope that I have not managed to cut off anybody before their prime.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): That was a substantial opening speech.

Simon Hoare: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You will recall that on Monday, Mr Speaker took to task those on the Treasury Bench for making a very important announcement about major policy changes on immigration to the media before it was made to this House. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) had an urgent question on that issue just this afternoon, and at the heart of the matter is the ministerial code. It has been brought to my attention that this afternoon, the Ministry of Justice has announced some fairly major changes: a limit to the length of time for which some offenders can be returned to prison, under plans to ease prison overcrowding, and a major shake-up of offenders. It seems that the Government are persistent offenders themselves on this matter. It strikes me as arrogantly cavalier that, given the very strong strictures from the Chair and on a day on which a UQ has been granted, another offence has been added to the charge sheet.

This is something that affects, and should concern, all Members of this House who do not sit on the Front Bench. Parliament hears important announcements as they affect our constituents, and public safety and the removal of people from our streets through the prison system and so on are of concern to all our constituents, irrespective of where we represent. I also understand that no indication has been given of a written ministerial statement on this important issue. As such, I rise to reinforce the point that has been made over the past several days on this significant breach of the ministerial code, and to inquire of you, Madam Deputy Speaker, whether—even at this late-ish stage on a sitting day—the Chair has had any indication at all of a statement from the Ministry of Justice, so that a relevant Minister can be questioned on what this policy means for our constituents.

5.15 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving notice of his point of order. He is entirely correct to say that the House took an urgent question earlier today on the provisions of the ministerial code. Those provisions make clear that when the House of Commons is sitting, major Government announcements should be made to the House first. That point has been made repeatedly from the Chair, including on multiple recent occasions. Ministers are accountable to this House, and should make every effort to inform this House of policy developments via statements wherever it is possible to do so. While I have been in the Chair, I have had no warning that a statement is due today. The Government and, no doubt, those on the Treasury Bench will have heard both the point of order and my response, and I trust they will act accordingly and with some urgency.

I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): It is a pleasure to rise to speak on Lords amendments to the Data (Use and Access) Bill. Over the course of debating the Bill, it has become customary to thank those in the other place for the work they have done, particularly Baroness Owen for her work on deepfakes and others who have campaigned boldly in that area.

I will begin by speaking to Lords amendment 49B. We have been clear that supporting the creative and AI sectors is not a zero-sum game; we need to support both sectors. Through their ham-fisted consultation on copyright and AI, the Government have raised great concern throughout the creative sector, and the resulting attempts to amend this Bill have been in response to the mess they have created. In Committee and on Report, we set out a series of amendments that focused on the outcome—not the process—for a solution in this area. Those amendments focused on ensuring that the position in law of copyright in this area was clear, on the need for proportionate and effective transparency, on removing barriers to start-ups, and on facilitating technological solutions via digital watermarking.

In one of the many interventions on the Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) mentioned the importance of implementing digital watermarking. He referred to it as a response to deepfakes, but it also has relevance to technical solutions, and it strikes me as quite odd that the Minister went on to cover broadly the same topics in his opening remarks, despite pointing out to my right hon. Friend that those topics were not relevant to the ongoing debate. That indicates how confused the treatment of this area in the Bill has become, and the need for clarity.

I pay tribute to Viscount Camrose, Lord Parkinson, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage), my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale), Baroness Kidron, and others in this House and in the other place, for their work on amendments to reach a resolution in this area. We had sympathy with earlier versions of those amendments, but also concerns about their workability and prescriptiveness. We have worked with Baroness Kidron to get to a position that we can now support; we believe that solutions need to incorporate the principles of transparency and proportionality. The amendment is not a perfect solution, but it is more reasonable than doing nothing.

I find it astounding that the main criticism that the Minister has made of Lords amendment 49B is that it has a run-in period prior to implementation and that people are calling for things to happen now. That is an odd way of approaching legislating. As the Opposition, we are working with other parties, among others, to try to find a solution to get the Minister out of a hole. I hope that Members across the House support the amendment.

Moving on to digital verification services, I welcome the Lords' disagreement with amendments 32 and 52, and support their amendments 32B, 32C, 52B and 52C on sex data accuracy, which received the support of Members in the other place. As my noble Friend Viscount Camrose said in his speech, it was necessary to re-table amended versions of the clauses on data accuracy previously secured in the other place because our new clause 21 was not in scope for debate in the Lords. The Lords

amendments are technical and complex, so if you will forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will speak briefly to new clause 21 to explain for the benefit of Members how things have evolved over time.

Our new clause 21 would have compelled public authorities to correct the datasets they hold in relation to sex and to collect data on the protected characteristic of sex in accordance with the legal definition set out in the Supreme Court's judgment: biological sex. It would also have allowed public authorities to collect data on acquired sex as recorded on a gender recognition certificate where that is relevant and lawful. It would have imposed no new obligations on the correction of data held by public authorities—the obligation already exists under article 5(1)(d) of the UK General Data Protection Regulation—but would simply have put in place a timescale for correcting data on sex. We know from the findings of the Sullivan review that that correction is much needed and long overdue.

To address a misconception, new clause 21 was silent on how sex is recorded in physical and digital forms of identity for those holding a gender recognition certificate. That is a sensitive issue for the 8,500 holders of GRCs in the UK, and we hope that much-needed clarity in this area will be given by the Equality and Human Rights Commission in its guidance due to be laid before Parliament next month. It will be up to the Secretary of State to make rules as to how that guidance is implemented in digital verification services. However, that issue, while important, does not affect the clear obligation that already exists in law to record data on sex accurately.

Lords amendments 32C and 32B, and disagreement with amendment 32, would compel the Secretary of State to examine whether the public authorities that will act as data sources for the digital verification services system ascertain sex data reliably in accordance with biological sex and, where lawful and relevant, with sex as recorded on a gender recognition certificate. That would prevent inaccurate sex data from being entrenched and proliferated in the digital verification services system. Lords amendments 52B and 52C, and disagreement with amendment 52, would give the Secretary of State the power to define in a data dictionary sex data as biological sex and, where relevant, sex as recorded on a gender recognition certificate. That could then be applied across the digital verification services system, the register of births and deaths, and other circumstances where public authorities record personal data. The amendments are critical for correcting our compromised datasets on sex and would ensure that poor-quality and inaccurate data does not undermine digital verification services.

To be clear, if our amendments do not make it into the Bill, self-ID will be brought forward through the back door, risking the protections that single-sex spaces offer to everyone. Self-ID is not and never has been the position in UK law. I do not understand why the Government are resisting these measures. Digital verification systems need to be trustworthy to deliver the benefits intended by the Bill. If they are not trustworthy, the system will fail. I therefore commend these vital and much-needed amendments to the House.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Let me join others in expressing my gratitude for the work of many Members, especially in the other place—in particular, Baroness Owen and Baroness Kidron—but

[Victoria Collins]

also across this House. There has been a great deal of cross-party work, including much constructive discussion on many elements of the Bill with the Minister. Today, though, I will refer specifically to Lords amendment 49B.

I am lucky enough to represent a part of Hertfordshire that is woven into British creativity, from Graham Greene of Berkhamsted, whose masterpiece “Brighton Rock” shaped our cultural consciousness, to Eric Morecambe of Harpenden, whose partnership in Morecambe and Wise brought joy to millions, while the music of the Devines from Berkhamsted gets us up and dancing, and local artists such as Mary Casserley and Andrew Keenleyside paint our daily lives in ways that bring perspective, colour and joy in a way that only artists can achieve. Our landscapes in Ashridge and Aldbury have inspired film-makers from Disney to the producers of the Harry Potter films, and our pubs have been featured in films including “Bridget Jones”.

Today, this creative legacy faces an unprecedented threat. The current situation is more than just alarming; it is threatening the essence of our national identity and our creative economy. We hear concerns about resources for protecting our creative sector, but those arguments miss a crucial point: our creative industries, combined, contribute £126 billion to our economy, employ 2.4 million people, and are growing significantly faster than the wider economy. The question is not whether we can afford to protect these industries, but whether we can afford not to. When we invest in enforcing copyright protections, we are also investing in safeguarding one of Britain’s greatest economic assets and our competitive advantage on the world stage.

The transparency provisions in Lords amendment 49B are essential and proportionate. They apply proportionately to businesses of different sizes, while ensuring that our creative powerhouse can continue to thrive and, indeed, work hand in hand with technology. True leadership in AI means building on respect for creativity, not exploitation. Let me make it clear that this is not about resisting technology, but about recognising value and safeguarding innovation—and that brings me back home to Berkhamsted.

In the heart of my constituency sits the British Film Institute National Archive, one of the largest and more significant film collections in the world, comprising over 275,000 titles and 20,000 silent films dating back to 1894. It is a living memory of our national story, told on screen. Would we allow anyone to walk into the BFI and take whatever they liked? Would we let them scan, copy and republish those works without permission or compensation? Of course not. So I ask the Minister, why would we allow the same thing to happen in the digital world?

This is a defining moment. We can build an AI-powered future that respects and rewards creativity, or we can allow short-term interests to strip-mine the work of generations. The question before us today is simple: will we stand for a future when technology and creativity flourish together, or will we allow the foundations of our cultural life and economic prosperity to be hollowed out for short-term gain? I urge the Government to stand up for our creators, stand up for transparency, and stand up for the principle that, in the age of AI, human creativity still matters.

Chi Onwurah: I rise to speak to Lords amendment 43B, which deals with the safeguarding of scientific research and ensuring that the exemptions in the Bill are used for the purposes of such research alone.

On Second Reading, the Minister was unable to address the points that I raised; he ran out of time because of the length of the debate on AI and copyright, and I rather feel that the same has happened today. In the meantime, however, he wrote to me extensively to address my concerns. Although I do not think all of them were fully addressed, I was convinced that the Minister and, indeed, the Government did not intend this measure to widen the circumstances in which data could be reused for scientific research without consent. I am thinking of circumstances in which data would be reused for the training of AI models which were in themselves not contributing to new, creative scientific research. I believe—let me emphasise this—that all scientific research is creative, and that even if it is simply reproducing existing findings, it is creating confidence in the stock of scientific knowledge. I understand that the Minister does not intend to create a wild west, and I hope that he can confirm specifically that it is not the policy, intention or effect of the provisions to enable the reuse of personal data for AI.

Chris Bryant indicated assent.

Chi Onwurah: The Minister makes a hand signal, but I am of the view that hand signals are not reflected in *Hansard*. The Minister has far greater knowledge of proceedings in this House than I do, so I suspect he knows that too. If he would like to intervene on me, I would be very happy for him to do so.

Chris Bryant: I am being very badly behaved. I did not want to take up more time, but I will respond at the end. I think my hon. Friend will be happy.

5.30 pm

Chi Onwurah: I thank the Minister for his inadvertent intervention, and I look forward to my future happiness. Given his reassurances, I think the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee can work with the Government to ensure that the Bill enables scientific research through the use of the fantastic datasets that the UK is proud to have, without exposing the public to the reuse of their data for the purposes of training AI models or for other commercial purposes that are not within the remit of scientific research. I will be pleased to accept the Minister’s reassurances, and on that basis I do not wish to engage in further ping-pong between the Houses.

Pete Wishart: In reference to the earlier exchange, it seems that if you remember the Minister’s 60th birthday, you were not really there—but I really was not there. [Interruption.] Did I? I knew there must have been some very good reason. Why I was not there is now in *Hansard*.

There is profound disappointment within the creative sector today. Everyone in the sector really believed and hoped that the Minister would appear today with something in his back pocket that he would be able to bring out to give reassurance to the many artists and creators right across the country who are extremely anxious and concerned about the direction of the debate and

conversations about the use of their work. They are really concerned that some of their precious work, into which they have put so much time, effort, blood, sweat and tears, will be scraped up, trawled through by a bot and ingested by one of the large American tech companies, and then reappear as some minor mirror of itself.

No one has been satisfied with what has been said today, and the Minister has one last chance. I really hope that he can give something to the creative industries, or at least give them some sort of hope as we go forward into the next few months and years, because they are going into the next few months and years unprotected. They will have nothing that they can rely on, other than what is in the amendments, and I know for a fact that the Minister will ensure that they are voted down.

Today has been a curious day, too, because financial privilege has been invoked for a particular amendment. In my almost quarter of a century in this House, I have never seen that before. I think I know why it has been done: it is to ensure that the House of Lords does not get another opportunity to bring this measure back. I say to the Minister and the Secretary of State, who is shaking his head, that the Lords are already designing it. After it goes back to the House of Lords, it will come back once again. I am sure it does not invoke any financial privilege, but it is ultimately disappointing that the Lords will not be able to present the same motion again, which was their intention. That amendment has received overwhelming support from everybody across the creative sector, and I had really hoped that the Government would support it today.

The only reason we are here is the efforts of the Members of the House of Lords. I usually do not pay them much of a tribute or respect what they do, but they have played a blinder. In particular, Beeban Kidron—Baroness Kidron—has stuck to this agenda to ensure that these Lords amendments have been reinserted into the Bill. They have had to do it because the Government have not done so. The Government have done nothing to ensure that our creative sector is protected.

The Government say that there should be more time for this, but we do not have time. We have to act now to protect the livelihoods of 2.4 million creators in the UK against exploitation by some of the richest companies in the world. As I have said countless times throughout this Bill's passage, if we continue at this rate there will soon be nothing left to protect. The thing is that the Government should have acted earlier. They should have taken steps to protect creators' rights as a matter of urgency. Instead, it has been left to others to scramble to find a way to ensure that we had these vital Lords amendments to a Bill that, as the Minister has said on several occasions, was not designed for them.

The Government's motions will in effect set a timeline of several years before any resolution is reached on copyright transparency. I listened very carefully, as I always do, to what the Minister had to say about transparency, but I still do not understand why this cannot be done immediately. All the Government have to do is tell inventors, creators and copyright holders that their work is going to be used or ingested by one of the web crawlers that are in operation. That is all they would have to do, and it could be done very easily. There is no great technical problem in introducing transparency as a priority, and it could possibly happen within a few weeks.

Alison Hume: The hon. Member is making some important points. As Lord Brennan said recently, this Bill is an opportunity to regulate AI:

"This Bill, this bus, is an opportunity that the Government should be getting on rather than waiting for another bus several years down the road".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 12 May 2025; Vol. 845, c. 1932.]

This bus is leaving now, along with the opportunity to protect our creative rights. Does the hon. Member agree with me and share my concern that the Government are going to miss the bus?

Pete Wishart: I would always agree with the noble Lord Brennan. As somebody who played with him for many years in a parliamentary rock band, I think we all miss him in this House. He was spot-on when he said that: we have to act now.

Even if the Government want to change copyright law—I still do not know whether that is their intention, and the creative sector strongly opposes that—it will be years before creators have the slightest hope of protecting their work against creative theft. This sector has seen its work taken, used and exploited by tech companies. They came into this process hoping that they would finally get some protection, but instead of being heard, their hopes have been set aside again.

Lords amendment 49B does exactly what the sector has been calling for over many years. The fact that it has been tabled is a credit to the sustained campaign from our artists in the creative sector, who have organised themselves so efficiently and put such a compelling case. They have put so compelling and knowledgeable a case that our constituents have started to understand the complexities of copyright law, and they now realise its value in ensuring that the works of the artists they love, respect and like to listen to are recognised and that they will be compensated for their wonderful works. Despite what the Government say, merely enforcing the existing law will not be burdensome for AI firms, particularly as Lords amendment 49B allows the transparency requirements to be modified for small AI developers and for all UK-registered developers so that they are proportionate. This will prevent start-ups from being burdened with overly onerous regulation. In fact, all this proposal does is put UK start-ups on a level playing field with US tech giants that gain an unfair competitive advantage by ignoring copyright law. Transparency will make the legal risk of copyright infringement too great for AI firms to break the law. It will allow courts to hear cases quickly, establish precedent and kill any argument that there is uncertainty in UK law. If we can see what has been stolen, it is easier to stop its being stolen and to get redress when it continues to be stolen.

It is now up to the Government to fix this. If they are serious about protecting our creative industries—they should be, and I accept that that is what they intend to do—then they cannot stop at working groups and economic impact assessments. That is the bare minimum; it is not, by any measure, enough.

If this is the last opportunity we have to put the case, it is a black day for our creative sectors. They had hoped that this would be the day the Government appeared with something that satisfied at least some of their concerns. They deserve to have their work protected fairly. They were looking for anything from the Government to see that they were clearly on their side and were prepared to

[Pete Wishart]

do something. I think we already know exactly what they will decide, but the Government now have a choice: remove Lords amendment 49B and turn their back on the creative industries, or find an actual way to protect our creative sector and make sure that they back it.

Chris Bryant: I was anticipating more contributions from other Members, but it is a delight to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to follow on from the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart). I will not speak at great length, Members will be delighted to hear.

First, I want to refer to the matter of financial privilege, because the hon. Member referred to it just now. It is not the Government who decide whether financial privilege is engaged. It is a simple matter decided on advice from the Clerks to the Chair, which is determined from two motions, from 1671 and 1678. Where there is any financial implication of a Bill, or in this case an amendment that comes from the House of Lords, it is a simple matter as to whether or not the financial privilege of the House of Commons is engaged. Anything that obviously requires a system of enforcement is likely to require expenditure. That is why we would not choose to waive our financial privilege in relation to these amendments today.

Pete Wishart: A money resolution to the Bill was passed with Second Reading. I looked at it and there is nothing that says there is any financial limit on any measures included in the Bill, so I am a bit confused about why financial privilege has to be invoked on that basis.

Chris Bryant: It is not the Government who invoke financial privilege. It is the House that does it, via the Speaker's Chair. I am afraid that that is a debate we will have to have at another point. Much as I love debating motions from 1671 and 1678, I think we might move forward.

The only point I will make to the hon. Gentleman about his contribution on the creative industries—he knows that on many of these issues we completely and utterly agree—is that if there were a simple way of being able to enforce those rights today, I would seize it. If he wants to write to me with a suggestion on what that actually looks like and what we would do today to be able to enforce the rights under the existing law today, then of course I would be happy to look at it.

I also said that I would respond to the point from the Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Chi Onwurah). The Bill creates no new permission to reuse data for scientific research. It is not the effect of the provisions to provide blanket approval of the reuse of personal data for AI training under the banner of scientific research. I hope that that meets some of her understandable concerns.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I know that it is completely not in order, but I am going to say it anyway and end on this point. We have discussed some very serious points, but I do just wish that Remember Monday will win the Eurovision song contest on Saturday evening, with their song, “What the Hell Just Happened?” I wish Lauren, Holly-Anne and Charlotte all the best of British.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 371, Noes 98.

Division No. 198]

[5.43 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)

Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Aquarone, Steff
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Babarinde, Josh
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana (*Proxy vote cast by Zarah Sultana*)
Berry, Siân
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Blackman, Kirsty
Blake, Olivia
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Bryant, Chris
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Cane, Charlotte
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chadwick, David
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Chowns, Ellie

Clark, Feryal
Coghlan, Chris
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Collins, Victoria
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Cooper, Daisy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley
Dance, Adam
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Ann
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Davies-Jones, Alex
Dean, Bobby
Dean, Josh
Denyer, Carla
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dollimore, Helena
Doogan, Dave
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, rh Maria
Eccles, Cat
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Egan, Damien
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Forster, Mr Will
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Franklin, Zöe
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gelderder, Anna

Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gordon, Tom
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Hussain, Imran
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jermy, Terry
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Ayoub
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim

Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 MacCleary, James
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Martin, Mike
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayer, Alex
 Maynard, Charlie
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 Medi, Llinos
 Midgley, Anneliese
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moon, Perran
 Moran, Layla (*Proxy vote cast by Zöe Franklin*)
 Morden, Jessica
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Mullane, Margaret
 Munt, Tessa
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, Susan
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
 Osborne, Tristan

Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reid, Joani
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Roome, Ian
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sabine, Anna
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slade, Vikki
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Nick
 Sollom, Ian
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevenson, Kenneth

Stone, Will
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Luke
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote cast by Callum Anderson*)
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Voaden, Caroline
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Waugh, Paul
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Katie
 Wilkinson, Max
 Wishart, Pete
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Wrigley, Martin
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Young, Claire
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

Gerald Jones and
 Kate Dearden

NOES

Anderson, Lee
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Blackman, Bob
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Burghart, Alex
 Cartlidge, James
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Cleverly, rh Sir James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cooper, John
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Cross, Harriet
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Dineneage, Dame Caroline
 Duffield, Rosie
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Evans, Dr Luke

Farage, Nigel
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 French, Mr Louie
 Garnier, Mark
 Glen, rh John
 Grant, Helen
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Kruger, Danny
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mayhew, Jerome
 McMurdoch, James
 McVey, rh Esther
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Morrissey, Joy

Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 Paul, Rebecca
 Pochin, Sarah
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Rankin, Jack
 Reed, David
 Robertson, Joe
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley
 Tice, Richard
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike

Tellers for the Noes:
James Wild and
Gregory Stafford

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House insists on Commons Amendment 32 to which the Lords have disagreed and disagrees with the Lords in their Amendments 32B and 32C proposed to the words restored to the Bill by the Lords disagreement.

Clause 56

NATIONAL UNDERGROUND ASSET REGISTER:
 ENGLAND AND WALES

Motion made, and Question put,

That this House agrees with the Lords in their Amendments 34B and 34C proposed instead of the words left out of the Bill by Commons Amendment 34.—(*Chris Bryant.*)

A Division was called.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Division off.

Question agreed to.

Clause 67

MEANING OF RESEARCH AND STATISTICAL PURPOSES

Motion made, and Question put,

That this House disagrees with the Lords in their Amendment 43B.—(*Chris Bryant.*)

The House divided: Ayes 304, Noes 68.

Division No. 199]

[6.1 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella

Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Josh
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hillier, Dame Meg

Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Hussain, Imran
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Ayoub
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Myer, Luke

Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Onn, Melanie
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reid, Joani
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stone, Will
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred

Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote cast by Callum Anderson*)
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian

Ward, Chris (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Waugh, Paul
 Welsh, Michelle
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Katie
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Gerald Jones and
 Kate Dearden**

NOES

Amos, Gideon
 Aquarone, Steff
 Babarinde, Josh
 Begum, Apsana (*Proxy vote cast by Zarah Sultana*)
 Berry, Siân
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Chowns, Ellie
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Dance, Adam
 Davies, Ann
 Doogan, Dave
 Dyke, Sarah
 Forster, Mr Will
 Franklin, Zöe
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Green, Sarah
 Harding, Monica
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Kohler, Mr Paul

Lake, Ben
 MacCleary, James
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Martin, Mike
 Mathew, Brian
 Maynard, Charlie
 Medi, Llinos
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Moran, Layla (*Proxy vote cast by Zöe Franklin*)
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Murray, Susan
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Roome, Ian
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Sollom, Ian
 Sultana, Zarah
 Taylor, Luke
 Voaden, Caroline
 Wilkinson, Max
 Wishart, Pete
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:

**Bobby Dean and
 Mr Tom Morrison**

Question accordingly agreed to.

Before Clause 138

REQUIREMENT TO MAKE PROVISION IN RELATION TO
 TRANSPARENCY OF BUSINESS DATA USED IN RELATION TO
 AI MODELS

Motion made, and Question put,

That this House disagrees with the Lords in their Amendment 49B.
 —(*Chris Bryant.*)

The House divided: Ayes 297, Noes 168.

Division No. 200]

[6.12 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Anderson, Callum
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Bryant, Chris
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Josh
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel

Hughes, Claire
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Onn, Melanie
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reid, Joani
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scroggham, Michelle
 Seward, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stone, Will
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote cast by Callum Anderson*)

Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Waugh, Paul
 Welsh, Michelle

Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Katie
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Kate Dearden and
Gerald Jones

NOES

Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Lee
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Begum, Apsana (*Proxy vote cast by Sarah Sultana*)
 Berry, Siân
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Burghart, Alex
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Cartlidge, James
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Chowns, Ellie
 Cleverly, rh Sir James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Cross, Harriet
 Dance, Adam
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Denyer, Carla
 Dinéage, Dame Caroline
 Doogan, Dave
 Duffield, Rosie
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dyke, Sarah
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farage, Nigel
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley

Franklin, Zöe
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Garnier, Mark
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Ollie
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Grant, Helen
 Green, Sarah
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Khan, Ayoub
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kruger, Danny
 Lake, Ben
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 MacCleary, James
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Martin, Mike
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Charlie
 McMurdoch, James
 McVey, rh Esther

Medi, Llinos
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla (*Proxy vote cast by Zöe Franklin*)
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Susan
 Morrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Pochin, Sarah
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Rankin, Jack
 Reed, David
 Robertson, Joe
 Roome, Ian
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil

Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Tice, Richard
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Voaden, Caroline
 Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wishart, Pete
 Wood, Mike
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
Bobby Dean and
Mr Tom Morrison

Question accordingly agreed to.

6.24 pm

More than two hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the Lords message, the proceedings were interrupted (Programme Order, this day).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83G).

Clause 140

DATA DICTIONARY

Motion made, and Question put,

That this House insists on Commons Amendment 52 to which the Lords have disagreed and disagrees with the Lords in their Amendments 52B and 52C proposed to the words restored to the Bill by the Lords disagreement.—(*Chris Bryant.*)

The House divided: Ayes 366, Noes 98.

Division No. 201]

[6.25 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Amos, Gideon

Anderson, Callum
 Aquarone, Steff
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Baker, Alex

Baker, Richard
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana (*Proxy vote cast by Zarah Sultana*)
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Byrne, Ian
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Ellie
 Clark, Feryal
 Coghlan, Chris
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Collins, Victoria
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Cooper, Daisy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Dance, Adam
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex

Dean, Bobby
 Dean, Josh
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doogan, Dave
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Dyke, Sarah
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kiriith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Forster, Mr Will
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Francis, Daniel
 Franklin, Zöe
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gordon, Tom
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Heylings, Pippa

Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jermy, Terry
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 MacCleary, James
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Maguire, Ben
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Martin, Mike
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 Maynard, Charlie
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 Medi, Llinos
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu

Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Moran, Layla (*Proxy vote cast by Zöe Franklin*)
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Mullane, Margaret
 Munt, Tessa
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Murray, Susan
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onn, Melanie
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reid, Joani
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Roome, Ian
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sabine, Anna
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogg, Michelle
 Seward, Mark
 Shah, Naz

Shanker, Baggy
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Slade, Vikki
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Sollom, Ian
Stainbank, Euan
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stone, Will
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Sultana, Zarah
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, David
Taylor, Luke
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thompson, Adam
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote cast by Callum Anderson*)
Turley, Anna

Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Karl
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Voaden, Caroline
Wakeford, Christian
Ward, Chris (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Waugh, Paul
Welsh, Michelle
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Katie
Wilkinson, Max
Wishart, Pete
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Wrigley, Martin
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Young, Claire
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Kate Dearden and
Gerald Jones

NOES

Anderson, Lee
Andrew, rh Stuart
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Blackman, Bob
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Burghart, Alex
Cartlidge, James
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Cross, Harriet
Davies, Mims
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Duffield, Rosie
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Evans, Dr Luke
Farage, Nigel
Fortune, Peter

Fox, Sir Ashley
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Garnier, Mark
Glen, rh John
Grant, Helen
Griffiths, Alison
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jopp, Lincoln
Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
Kruger, Danny
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lopez, Julia
Mak, Alan

Malthouse, rh Kit
Mayhew, Jerome
McMurdock, James
McVey, rh Esther
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
Paul, Rebecca
Pochin, Sarah
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Rankin, Jack
Reed, David
Robertson, Joe
Rosindell, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil

Simmonds, David
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Spencer, Dr Ben
Stafford, Gregory
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Bradley
Tice, Richard
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Wild, James
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wood, Mike

Tellers for the Noes:
Katie Lam and
Mr Richard Holden

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 141

CREATING OR SOLICITING THE CREATION OF PURPORTED
INTIMATE IMAGE OF ADULT

Resolved,

That this House does not insist on Commons Amendment 55 to which the Lords have disagreed and agrees with the Lords in their Amendments 55D and 55E proposed in lieu of Commons Amendment 55.—(*Chris Bryant.*)

Resolved,

That this House agrees with the Lords in their Amendment 56B.—(*Chris Bryant.*)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83H(2)), That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for insisting on Commons Amendment 32, disagreeing with the Lords in their Amendments 32B and 32C, disagreeing with the Lords in their Amendments 43B and 49B, insisting on Commons Amendment 52 and disagreeing with the Lords in their Amendments 52B and 52C.

That Chris Bryant, Anna Turley, Callum Anderson, Rachel Hopkins, Katie White, Dr Ben Spencer and Victoria Collins be members of the Committee;

That Chris Bryant be the Chair of the Committee.

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(*Keir Mather.*)

Question agreed to.

Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.

Sanctions

6.40 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): I beg to move,

That the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) Regulations 2025 (SI, 2025, No. 504), dated 22 April 2025, a copy of which was laid before this House on 23 April, be approved.

This instrument amends the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019. It was laid before Parliament on 23 April under powers in the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018, and the measures in the regulations, which subject to the affirmative procedure, entered into force on 24 April. Sanctions are a powerful tool in our armoury. They play an important part in promoting peace and security abroad, upholding international norms and rules, and protecting our citizens at home. Since coming into power, this Government have ramped up action with our partners, and that includes leading the way on targeting Russia's revenues, bearing down on its military industrial complex, and deterring and disrupting Iran's support for Russia.

Just last Friday, the Prime Minister announced a major package of sanctions to target the decrepit and dangerous shadow fleet carrying Russian oil. It is the largest package of sanctions against the shadow fleet, with 110 targets. According to some estimates, sanctions have crippled 200 ships, almost half of Putin's dedicated fleet. The Government's support for Ukraine remains steadfast. Our total support for Ukraine now stands at £18 billion, including £3 billion a year of military aid and our £2.26 billion contribution to the G7 extraordinary revenue acceleration loans scheme.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I commend the Minister on bringing the measure forward. I do not think there is anybody in this House who would not be encouraged by what the Minister and Government are doing in bringing in the sanctions. The one thing that always concerns everybody—the Minister knows this—is the £22.7 billion of frozen Russian assets. We all wish to know whether the Government can pursue those assets with a vengeance and an evangelical zest. That would be a better zest than any other. If we put a squeeze on the frozen Russian assets, we can use them for the benefit of Ukraine, and strengthen everyone who supports Ukraine.

Stephen Doughty: I thank the hon. Gentleman again for his steadfast support for Ukraine, and for raising this important issue. As I said, we have already ensured that important resources get to Ukraine. Thanks to the speedy passage of measures through this House, and support from all parts of the House, we made sure that happened, and it is making a tangible difference. Two thirds of the ERA loan scheme funding that I mentioned has been disbursed and is immediately supporting Ukraine in obtaining vital military equipment. He rightly asks about frozen Russian sovereign assets more widely. As the Foreign Secretary said yesterday, we are working apace with international partners to look at all lawful means of ensuring that Russia pays for the horrific damage and destruction that it has done in Ukraine. I can assure the hon. Gentleman on that point. We will of course come back to the House in due course to update Members.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Minister referred to the attempts to cripple the ghost ships and fleet. Does that have any effect on the shipments of oil to third parties, such as India, that refine the oil and then sell it on to countries that, like us, are trying to sanction Russia directly?

Stephen Doughty: The right hon. Gentleman asks an important question. We take up all possible avenues of limiting Putin's war machine and the energy revenues that go towards it. We keep all options under consideration, and we look at them carefully. As he knows, I will not comment on any future actions or designations for obvious reasons, but I can tell him that this action on the shadow fleet has had a significant real-time impact on Putin's ability to wage war. I have given this figure on a number of occasions, but our sanctions programme overall has denied Russia \$450 billion, which would have been enough to keep this war going for many more years. The action has had a tangible impact. Action taken under the last Government, and the action taken by this Government, which has been accelerated, is having a real impact on Putin's war machine. Again, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his consistent support for Ukraine, and his support for these measures.

We are absolutely committed to securing a just and lasting peace in Ukraine. Maximising economic pressure on Russia is key to that, which is why we are continuing to introduce sanctions. We have now sanctioned more than 2,400 entities and individuals under the Russia regime. UK sanctions have also frustrated Russian trade: Russian imports to the UK have fallen by more than 98% since the invasion, and UK exports to Russia are down by more than 80%. We will maintain the relentless pressure on Putin, alongside our allies, to force him to the table and ensure that he engages seriously in negotiations. We reiterate our call on Russia to accept a full, unconditional ceasefire in Ukraine in order to create the space for talks on a just and lasting peace, and we commend President Zelensky for making his own commitment to peace by expressing his openness to engaging in direct talks with Putin. On Monday, the Foreign Secretary hosted Foreign Ministers from the Weimar+ group of key European allies to discuss our joint efforts to strengthen European security and secure a just and lasting peace in Ukraine. The House can be assured that these conversations form part of all our engagement with partners and allies across the world; indeed, I had such conversations today.

Now is the time for Putin to come to the table, and for Russia to show that it is serious about ending this war or else face the consequences. The UK stands ready to ratchet up the pressure on Russia, so that it ends its brutal war of aggression. As I have said, we will continue to explore all measures through which we can ratchet up economic pressure. The statutory instrument allows us to go even further in our efforts to target Russia's revenue streams and prevent the Kremlin building its military and industrial capabilities. It introduces a package of more than 150 new trade sanctions, including new, innovative measures that will prevent UK expertise from being used in Russia's defence and energy sectors. It will deny Russia sophisticated UK technology and software, and will expand our prohibitions, with the aim of further constraining Russia's economic growth and ability to fuel its war machine.

Let me deal with each of the measures in the instrument. First, it introduces new export prohibitions that apply to a wide range of goods, including chemicals, plastics, metals, machinery and electronics. These prohibitions will deny Russia the means of procuring products that have military and industrial uses. Secondly, we are extending our prohibitions on the transfer of technology, applying them to a broader set of technologies relating to goods that are important for Russia's military-industrial sectors, and for its economic development. Through these measures, we are removing UK expertise—whether in intellectual property, blueprints or industrial know-how—from Putin's critical supply chains.

Thirdly, the instrument will ban the transfer of software relating to business enterprise, industrial design, and oil and gas exploration and production. As has been said, Putin relies on energy production and exports to fuel his war economy, so the aim of these sanctions is to make key sectors of the Russian economy less productive and therefore less able to fuel this illegal and barbarous war against Ukraine. Fourthly, we are banning the import of Russian synthetic diamonds that have been processed in third countries, and helium. This targets future funding sources that Russia is developing, as well as potential circumvention routes. Finally, the instrument clarifies the enforcement responsibilities for a small number of trade sanctions on Russia. This will enable the office of trade sanctions implementation in the Department for Business and Trade to enforce certain trade sanctions offences, and to refer serious offences to His Majesty's Revenue and Customs for criminal enforcement consideration.

This Government remain committed to European security, and to our steadfast support for Ukraine. We are committed to standing up for the values of democracy and the rule of law, values that continue to be attacked so brutally by Russia. Sanctions, including this important package, are a key part of our efforts, and I commend the regulations to the House.

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

6.49 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): We on the Opposition Benches support this statutory instrument and all measures that bear down on Putin's regime and undermine his ability to prosecute the barbaric, illegal invasion of Ukraine. We support the further measures on technology transfers and software, and on diamonds and chemicals, and the other measures to tighten the import and export regimes. Of course, all of those are built on the critical mass of sanctions introduced by the Conservative Government. Working with allies, we imposed the largest and most severe set of sanctions that Russia had ever seen, in order to cripple Putin's war machine. We sanctioned around 2,000 individuals, companies and groups.

All of us should be in no doubt that the economic pressure that we and our allies have been exerting means that Russia cannot afford to sustain the cost of this illegal invasion. Indeed, Russian interest rates are at levels not seen for decades, and welfare payments are being cut. The international community's sanctions have deprived Putin of \$400 billion since February 2022—money that Russia could otherwise have spent on the war in Ukraine.

On that note, I want to push the Government on four points, because we must strive ceaselessly to constrain Putin's war machine and never see our actions as an end state. First, we recognise that some measures in today's SI will deal with specific issues relating to third countries, but can the Minister confirm whether his Department is currently looking into wider secondary sanctions? If so, what is the scope? What kind of diplomatic engagement is he having with countries whose economies are being used to circumnavigate the international sanctions response, and what measures is he considering on the big-ticket issues that are well understood in this House?

Secondly, when is the Minister's internal deadline for getting the proceeds from the sale of Chelsea football club out the door, and how exactly does he envisage the money being spent? Can he update us on the Foreign Secretary's engagement with the trustees, the Government of Portugal and the European Commission on this issue? We need to act with urgency, because we are talking about more than £2 billion. It goes without saying that this money could be a huge boost to the humanitarian effort supporting those affected by the invasion.

Thirdly, can the Minister explain why the £2.26 billion loan to Ukraine, backed by the profits of sanctioned Russian assets, will be paid by the Treasury over three years rather than in one immediate instalment, especially given that it is earmarked for military equipment? Can he confirm, with a simple yes or no, whether work is actively ongoing in the FCDO and the Treasury to find additional legal solutions to allow for the mobilisation of sanctioned assets?

Finally, there has been much commentary in recent weeks about initiatives to secure peace, but we urge the Government—in the strongest terms—to leverage Britain's influence in every way that they can to help ensure that peace is secured on Ukraine's terms. As has been the case from the outset, it remains ultimately for Ukraine, as a proud and sovereign nation that has sacrificed so much to defend itself and the fundamental freedoms that we all hold dear, to decide its own future.

Of course, we want this terrible war to be brought to an end. Like President Zelensky, we hope for a lasting, reliable peace, but the Euro-Atlantic community must continue to be robust in the face of Putin's aggression. The lesson of the past 20 years is clear: he only comes back for more. Today we have the added threat that the axis of authoritarian states is collaborating to wreak destruction on our continent, with Iran providing weapons and North Korea providing troops to support Putin. We even understand that a number of Chinese civilians are supporting Russia's campaign. The stakes could not be higher, but there remains nothing inevitable about a victory for Russia, which thought it could capture Kyiv and subjugate Ukraine within days. Three years on, the cost to Russia has been enormous and unsustainable.

We acknowledge that the UK Government are now proactively seeking to end the war through negotiations and that this takes UK policy on Ukraine in a new direction, but we must also remember that we and our NATO allies have a collective GDP that is 20 times greater than Russia's, and a collective defence inventory that is many times larger than Putin's. The Ukrainians are fighting valiantly, and we must ensure that they have the capabilities they need in their hands and the diplomatic

[Wendy Morton]

support they require. The Government need to bring allies with us in supporting Ukraine to achieve a just and fair peace on its terms.

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

6.54 pm

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): I congratulate the Minister and the Government on their work to date on sanctioning Russia. The UK must continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with our allies and the brave Ukrainian people in resisting Putin's aggression. The support for Ukraine across this House sends a really strong message to the Kremlin, so we welcome this latest statutory instrument, which rightly tightens the screw on Russia's ability to wage its illegal war.

These amendments expand our sanctions regime in three important ways. First, by extending export bans on a wide range of products—chemicals, electronics, plastics, metals and machinery—we are further disrupting the industrial base that fuels Putin's war machine. Secondly, by banning the transfer of associated software and technical knowledge, including cloud-based solutions, we will prevent the back-door flow of intellectual capital into the Kremlin's hands. Thirdly, by introducing import bans on Russian synthetic diamonds and helium products, even when processed in third countries, we will cut off future revenue streams to help fund this war. These measures respond to the real-world attempts by Russia to sidestep sanctions by using complex supply chains and third-country networks. They align the UK with our allies—the EU, the United States and the G7—making our collective response far more powerful than going it alone.

However, while I support these measures, I hope that Ministers will consider going further. If the Government are serious about holding Putin to account, sanctions must be not only enforced but escalated. The Liberal Democrats have been saying this for months: the UK should begin the seizure, not just the freezing, of Russian state assets.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for what he is laying out, and I absolutely agree with him that the support for these measures across this House is really powerful. I was most recently in Kyiv two weeks ago, and the look on the faces of the people subjected to war crimes by the Russian army will stay with me for a very long time. That underlined to me the importance of UK efforts to support them, and I completely agree with his point about moving from freezing to seizing Russian assets. The Minister today and the Foreign Secretary earlier this week talked about working on a multilateral basis. Does my hon. Friend agree that if such an agreement cannot be found, we should consider moving on a unilateral basis in a leadership role for the United Kingdom?

James MacCleary: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. There is an estimated £22 billion in frozen assets from Russian central bank reserves held and locked up in the UK at the moment. That money could and should be used to help rebuild Ukraine, provide humanitarian assistance and purchase the matériel that the Ukrainians

need to defend themselves, and the UK should certainly be taking a leadership role in seizing those assets as soon as we can. The United States is already moving in that direction, as are EU member states. The United Kingdom, as we have said, should be leading, not lagging behind.

We must also close the loopholes that have allowed Russian oligarchs to continue laundering their dirty money in London. That means properly resourcing the National Crime Agency, strengthening the economic crime legislation, and demanding the use of Magnitsky sanctions not just for individuals but for their family members when wealth is transferred in an attempt to dodge accountability.

As a member of the UK's parliamentary delegation to the Council of Europe, I strongly support the register that the Council of Europe has established, on which the UK is taking a leading role, to record the damage that Russia has done to Ukraine. I know that the Government are backing that work, but I hope that Ministers will promote the register, which does not have a very high profile at the moment, to ensure that victims' claims are properly documented and Russia is held meaningfully to account for its actions.

Let us not forget that Putin's ambitions do not end with Ukraine. He is actively working to destabilise other sovereign states, including Georgia, Moldova, Romania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and others in a wider attempt to erode European stability and democratic resilience.

Let me be clear: the Liberal Democrats believe in the rule of law, the sovereignty of nations and the right of people to choose peace over tyranny, and Putin's war is a grotesque assault on all those principles. This legislation is a necessary step, but it must be the beginning, not the end, of our efforts to hold Putin and the Russian state to account. We support the motion, but we will keep pushing this Government to be bolder, faster and more determined in their support for Ukraine and its defence of the values we all hold dear.

6.58 pm

Stephen Doughty: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to this debate. The measures introduced by this statutory instrument show how the UK continues to use its powers to apply further pressure on Putin, which, crucially, is to help secure an enduring peace and show that we remain fully behind Ukraine. I really welcome the strong support there always is across this House, from almost everybody—I note that one party is absent again. We have strong support, and although we may have disagreements with the Official Opposition across the Dispatch Boxes, but on Ukraine there has been absolute unity. I am glad that that has continued, and I thank them for that, and indeed the Liberal Democrats and other parties, too.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): On the regulations, does the Minister agree that work also needs to be done on the shadow oil fleet, which is out there supplying money and support to Putin?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman might have missed it earlier on, but I outlined the significant work that we have done on that, including targeting hundreds of vessels, which is having a real impact. I will come to that impact in a moment.

The shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), asked a number of specific questions. She asked about third-country circumvention and the measures we are taking diplomatically—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. We must now take the motion relating to deferred Divisions.

DEFERRED DIVISIONS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 41A(3)). That, at this day's sitting, Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to the Motion in the name of Stephen Doughty relating to Sanctions.—(Kate Dearden.)

Question agreed to.

Stephen Doughty: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I had forgotten about that particular procedural aspect of talking past 7 o'clock. Thank you for giving me the eye to remind me that that was coming; I appreciate it.

As I was saying, on third-country circumvention, the shadow Minister asked me what measures we are taking. I can assure her and the House that this has been an extremely high priority for me and the Foreign Secretary. I regularly raise issues and we have a number of countries that we are particularly focused on. We have the common high priority list of items that are of most value to Russia's military industrial complex. I assure her that we have also taken robust action against entities and individuals who have been involved in those matters. We have set out a number of those measures in past sanctions packages. I raise them on an almost weekly basis to try to bear down on that.

The right hon. Lady asked about the proceeds from Chelsea football club. We are determined for the proceeds to reach humanitarian causes in Ukraine as soon as possible, and we are doing everything we can to bring that about quickly. The shadow Minister will understand that this is a complex legal issue, but we are working with our international partners. We have engaged with Abramovich's team and we are exploring all options to ensure that the proceeds reach vulnerable people in Ukraine who are most in need.

The right hon. Lady asked about the tranches of the ERA funding. I can assure her that two of the tranches, over two thirds of that funding, is already out the door. I spoke to Ukrainian Ministers about that and its availability, and they confirmed that they had access to it. She asked a detailed question about why it is being done in three tranches. I have just written to the shadow Foreign Secretary to set that out in more detail. We can make sure that she gets a copy of that letter. There are technical and other reasons for that, but we are ensuring that Ukraine gets what it needs right now, and is able to plan and deliver in its own defence.

The right hon. Lady asked, as others did—it was raised by the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Lewes (James MacCleary)—about Russian sovereign assets. I repeat what I said to my friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), which is that we are working at pace on that with others. We are exploring all lawful options to ensure that Russia pays. We have been leading; we have not been lagging. Indeed, the ERA loan is very much a testament to our leadership

on this issue and I can assure the Liberal Democrat spokesperson that we are engaging very closely with international partners on that, as the Foreign Secretary said yesterday.

The right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) rightly talked about the importance of continued and absolute support for Ukraine. I can assure her that that is the case, particularly at this time. The leadership shown by President Zelensky, President Trump and others in seeking an unconditional ceasefire and a just and lasting peace is crucial. We will continue to work with them on that and we will continue to support Ukraine in its endeavours. She rightly drew attention to the activities of others—North Korea, Iran and others—in supporting Russia's barbarous actions. We have taken action on many of those things.

The hon. Member for Lewes raised a couple of other points. On enforcement, I hope to have more news imminently and to be able to update the House on those matters. I promised that we would undertake an important review on the enforcement of sanctions across Government. It has been a crucial piece of work, which was rightly raised by many people. I hope we will have more to say on that very soon. I would also point him to the illicit finance and kleptocracy campaign led by the Foreign Secretary and me. We are taking a series of measures, working with Departments across Government, to ensure that London, our country and our wider British family are not used to support kleptocrats and those contrary to our national interests, or indeed Ukraine's interests in this specific case.

The hon. Gentleman raised the important role of the Council of Europe. I completely agree with him. My ministerial colleague the noble Lord Collins is currently attending a meeting of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers. We have taken important work there—not only on the register of loss and damage, but on crucial issues such as the special tribunal against Russian aggression, as the Foreign Secretary spoke about yesterday.

There were, rightly, a number of questions about the impact that these sanctions are having. The impact is substantial: the Russian Government have been forced to take their first major tax hike in more than 20 years, and, following a loss of \$7.6 billion in 2023—its first loss in 25 years—Gazprom, one of Putin's main sources of incomes, lost \$12.9 billion in 2024. Russian oil delivery now takes significantly longer due to sanctions, showing how they and the work on the shadow fleet have disrupted and impeded Russian trade.

James MacCleary: The Minister is speaking of the ways in which we are disrupting the Russian regime, but could he say a few words about those who are resisting the regime within Russia? We often speak about pressure being put on Russia to stop Putin's aggression, but we sometimes forget about those within Russia who are putting themselves at huge risk to resist the actions of the Russian President. Will the Minister mention how we look to support those who bravely stand up and resist the regime within Russia?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. Of course, our opposition here is to Putin's regime and what it is doing in Ukraine. We do not have a quarrel with the Russian people or with Russia; our quarrel is with Putin's regime, what it is

[Stephen Doughty]

doing and what he has brought his country to. It was hugely humbling to meet a number of leading figures in the past few weeks, including Vladimir Kara-Murza, who was brutally imprisoned by Putin's regime, and Yulia Navalnaya, whose husband, Alexei Navalny, died in prison. We continue to call for the release of Russian political prisoners; their imprisonment is absolutely abhorrent.

These measures are hugely important and are having an impact, and I welcome the unified support across the House for them. I commend these regulations to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE FOR THE INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY

Resolved,

That, in pursuance of paragraph 2A of Schedule 3 to the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009, Mary Curnock Cook CBE be appointed as a lay member of the Speaker's Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority for a period of five years from 2 June 2025 to 31 May 2030.—(*Lucy Powell.*)

PETITIONS

Repairs to Marsh Lock Horsebridge

7.7 pm

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): For three years, the Marsh lock horsebridge in Henley has been closed. The bridge connects Henley to Shiplake and is an integral part of the Thames path national trail. The petition I present today, which has more than 6,000 signatories and was started by nine-year-old Claudia Fennell, who is in the Gallery today, calls for the bridge to be reopened. I welcome news from the Environment Agency that money has been identified to begin design work, but it is only partial funding, and the future is still uncertain.

I take this opportunity to also put on the record my regret at the closure of events organiser Henley Swim due to the sewage crisis, and to express my concern about the pending strike action by lock keepers.

The EA must be given the resources needed to keep our river thriving economically and safe for all users. The petitioners therefore request that

"the House of Commons urge the Government to take immediate action to encourage the Environment Agency to repair and reopen Marsh Lock Horsebridge."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Marsh Lock Horsebridge should be repaired and reopened; notes that an online petition on the issue was started by Claudia Fennell; notes the online petition

on this issue has received over 6,000 signatures; notes the petition is supported by the former Mayor and the Deputy Mayor of Henley; further notes that the bridge has been closed since May 2022; notes that the bridge is an important part of the constituency community and impacts the mental and physical health of residents; notes that residents are currently unable to access the Thames path to Shiplake and numerous swimming spots; and further notes that local businesses reliant on the footfall from walkers and river-goers have been badly affected.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take immediate action to encourage the Environment Agency to repair and reopen Marsh Lock Horsebridge.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003067]

Permanent Post Office in Fakenham

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): Fakenham is the largest town in my constituency, and yet it has not had a permanent post office for more than five years. The town's high street banks are also closing one after the other, leaving no access to cash deposits for local businesses. This paper petition for a permanent post office for Fakenham, together with an online similar version, has collected 1,223 signatures in order to resolve those problems. It declares that

"residents of Fakenham and the surrounding villages need access to a permanent Post Office to service the needs of the community", and asks that the chief executive and the Government work with the banks to provide a long-term solution for access to cash and postal services through a permanent post office in the heart of Fakenham.

The petitioners therefore request that

"the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to ensure that a permanent Post Office is delivered to serve the needs of the Fakenham and the surrounding villages."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Broadland and Fakenham,

Declares that residents of Fakenham and the surrounding villages need access to a permanent Post Office to service the needs of our community; asks that the Chief Executive and the Government listen to our voices and work with the banks to provide a long term solution to access to cash and postal services through a Post Office in the heart of our town; and notes that an online petition on the same issue has collected 1,223 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to ensure that a permanent Post Office is delivered to serve the needs of the Fakenham and the surrounding villages.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003068]

Plastic Recycling in Leamington: Environmental Impact

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

7.9 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I will, if I may, start by encouraging you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to imagine being in your own home and unable to eat with your family, unable to leave food for even a minute without your kitchen being swarmed with flies, and unable to sleep in your own bed without flies landing on your face. Imagine flies everywhere, in every room of your house, in business premises, in pubs, in restaurants and in takeaways, and vile odours permeating your life whether at home, walking the streets or driving your car. That is the reality for hundreds of families in one part my constituency.

If that is not sufficiently real for those present, let me try to bring alive just how awful this is with the experience of one resident, who wrote to me saying:

“The day my son asked when mummy was going to stop the flies so he could eat his dinner without flies crawling into his mouth...was when I realised how terrible it had got.”

Imagine children being unable to eat without flies crawling into their mouths.

At a time when so many voters feel disillusioned with politics, it is more important than ever that Government—national and local—as well as their agencies address the everyday problems that impact on people’s lives. And the issue of flies and odours blighting families and whole communities is one such a problem.

I estimate that as many as 10,000—if not more—of my constituents in south Warwick, South Leamington and Whitnash are impacted by this. They have faced swarms of flies and foul odours for three years running. Their houses are infested with flies. They are unable to open their windows for fear of swarms entering their home. They are unable to prepare food in their kitchen without the constant cleaning of their work surfaces to clean off the fly excrement, which also adheres to their walls. Would any Member of this House be satisfied with their family living like that? This is not just a minor inconvenience; this is ruining people’s lives. People are getting ill, and some residents are actually selling up.

Then there is the all-pervasive foul-smelling odour. Constituents describe the smell as being like “raw sewage”. They say it is “sulphuric” and “toxic”. Many have told me that the smell is “utterly unbearable”. I have smelt it myself on many occasions. Again, this is substantially harming people and their lives. Two constituents have told me that their asthma has significantly worsened due to the smell, and, as a result, they have had to increase their medication. This is clearly a public health risk and it should be treated as such.

I hope that I have spelled out—albeit briefly—just how awful this is for my constituents, and it should not have been allowed to continue for three months let alone three years. Some may be thinking that this this sounds not too dissimilar to the plague of flies in the Book of Exodus, but, no, God is not to blame for this. The residents are clear: they believe, and I agree with them, that the source of this problem is the Berry Circular Polymers recycling plant, located less than 200 metres from a significant volume of local housing.

Let me be very clear: I am by no means against recycling. We know that recycling plants have a crucial role to play in sustainability. The issue here is not recycling but how businesses are held to account—and authorities demanding that they take seriously their commitment to their neighbours and their impacts on the local environment.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate on behalf of his constituents. I am almost flabbergasted that the local council has not taken action to address this issue. What has it done and what is it going to do to take away this enormous fly problem? The Book of Exodus does talk about the plague of flies, but I know that the council has been blamed for this one.

Matt Western: I thank the hon. Member—I will call him my hon. Friend—for his intervention. The council does have a role, and I will come on to that in more depth. It has tried to get involved and understand the nature of the problem, and to exercise certain powers, but this is where national Government, particularly the Environment Agency, have a role to play, as I will discuss. The council really does not have the powers that it needs to tackle local environmental health, which is its responsibility.

This is a case of desperately poor planning legislation—approved by the last Conservative Government and locally by a Conservative council—with a new light industrial estate built off a road that is one of the main arteries of south Leamington. The planning issue is not so much in the approval of the building of light industrial sheds—we see them all over the place—but in the failure to realise that a commercial use of the site, such as for recycling food packaging, would have a significant impact on a residential area. No approval was given by the local planning committee for what the actual use of the site would be; it was purely for the building of the sheds.

The local geography could not be worse. Hundreds of homes are on this road and thousands are off it. To have allowed a recycling plant that receives plastic covered in food waste on a daily basis to be built across the road from thousands of residents is absurd. The plant receives food and drink cartons, which we all discard daily and put into our recycling bins, where they can often sit for a couple of weeks. Then they are collected and taken to central processing depots such as the one in my constituency. They are perfect environments for flies to breed in.

It should not have taken a situation like this to make issues with the planning system so clear, but should anyone be in any doubt about the scale of the problem, let me be categorical: I have had reams of complaints and evidence sent to my office. There is a parallel between this site and the dreadful Walleys Quarry in Newcastle-under-Lyme, which many of us will have heard about over many years. Last Friday evening I informed residents that I had secured this debate, and by Monday morning my office had received over 100 complaints, with over 80% blaming the site that we believe to be the source of the problem: Berry Polymers.

When I held a public meeting, over 100 people attended, but hundreds more wanted to be there. That shows the strength of feeling on this issue and hopefully highlights to the Minister how badly it is affecting people’s lives.

[Matt Western]

To further understand the effects on people, I conducted a survey, asking on a scale of one to 10 how badly the flies and smell had impacted people's lives over the previous two years, with 10 being that it had completely impacted them. The average response was eight out of 10.

To exemplify how awful the situation is for residents, I will read some particularly distressing quotes. One resident said:

"I have to have fly nets over my foster babies' cots and bouncers".

Another said:

"It is apocalyptic, the flies affect every minute of your day, from waking, to washing, preparing food, working, cleaning, trying to sleep."

Another said:

"I've had to come away from various activities around town including paying my respects in the local cemetery because of the smell. Twice it's been so bad I've vomited while driving my car along Heathcote Road, which could cause an accident".

I hope that highlights for the Minister and those listening the severity of the problem and the urgent need for action. For clarity, I reiterate that those complaints have come in only in the past three days.

My constituents cannot sleep. Their children cannot play outside. They cannot eat without being swarmed by flies and engulfed in disgusting smells. To avoid any doubt over who the culprit is, I will bring to the Minister's attention some additional evidence. There are tens of households who say that the problem only began after the plant opened. One family had lived there for 30 years before the plant opened, and they never complained about a smell or flies, but now they say that it is unbearable.

It is not only residents who are complaining but former employees of the site. My office spoke to one former employee, who will remain anonymous. They said:

"Conditions were so poor nobody should have been working there."

They commented that when staff were walking around on site there were flies all over them, on their clothes, and biting them. Staff were expected to spend their breaks in a room covered in flies, and any food they tried to eat in there ended up with flies all over it. I have seen their evidence, and I have shared it with the Environment Agency and the Government. I have been to the site and seen the piles of thousands of flies lying around in the working area. That cannot be right; it is a health and safety issue for the people who have to work there. There are also flies flying around in the washrooms of that business. I cannot understand why it is still allowed to operate. The employees were in no doubt about the cause. They said that

"Berry was absolutely at fault and clearly the cause of the issue impacting the community."

Local residents, former employees and I all believe that the Berry Circular Polymers recycling plant is responsible for these issues.

Yet here we are, two years on, with no respite other than in the winter months, when the flies abate but the odours persist. We may ask, have the residents followed the correct complaints process and, likewise, have I? Absolutely. First, I have raised it many times with the

Environment Agency on behalf of residents. I have repeatedly conveyed the severity of the situation and the horrific impact on people's lives. After no success with the Environment Agency, I turned to the Minister under the last Government. After months of correspondence, I finally secured a meeting with that Minister in May 2024, but with the general election, it led to nothing. Following the election, I have twice met the new Minister, who I know fully understands the severity of the issue. The Minister swiftly set up a meeting with the Environment Agency to ensure the best available techniques are being used. I appreciate the pace with which the Department worked, but my constituents need answers now. They cannot be kept waiting.

I again followed up with the Environment Agency just a few weeks ago in April, to which it replied that it had only received two complaints. Yet we have received over a hundred in three days and hundreds over the course of three years, and we hear from residents on an almost daily basis that the problems persist. The Environment Agency is ignoring the complaints it has received over the past couple of years. The residents are busy people who lead busy lives; they cannot keep repeating the same complaint about the same company. They have been reporting these issues for years and have got nowhere, so they can be forgiven for not wanting to spend time every day reporting into a system that they do not believe works for them. They are fed up, and rightly so.

The Environment Agency has written to me to say that it

"did substantiate a strong odour on site",

and that it is now

"investigating this further and taking appropriate steps to ensure that they (Berry) comply with all requirements to mitigate any potential impact on the local community".

By coincidence, the Environment Agency came back to me just yesterday—perhaps because I had an Adjournment debate tonight. I have been chasing it for action on this issue for 18 months because my community and its residents' lives are blighted by it. The EA has said it is happy to meet me and is in the process of setting up a shiny new engagement website—but it misses the point. We have already met on several occasions. In previous meetings, we agreed on the need for officers on the ground to determine the origin of the flies and the source of the odour, and experience how awful the situation is. It now believes us on the source of the odour.

Where are we now? It should not be up to residents to go around with fly swatters and fly traps, which is one of the suggestions, to prove to the Environment Agency how severe the problem is. We did not agree on the need for a new website, as that represents more time-wasting and more faffing around while constituents go into a third summer, facing horrendous conditions at home, in their gardens and on their streets.

The Minister may be new to this topic, but I have heard this all before and yet nothing has changed. Berry Polymers has now declared that it will require advance notice of any unannounced visit by me for "health and safety reasons". Previously, I visited the site and that visit was unannounced, so I do not understand it. Why should I be prevented from trying to hold businesses like that to account when they cause an environmental hazard to many hundreds, if not thousands, of my constituents?

I take their health and safety concerns very seriously, and if I smell foul smells and see swarms of flies blighting my constituents' lives, I want to see action.

I know that the Minister takes the issue incredibly seriously. I must therefore insist that the Government now take action. Under current legislation, the Secretary of State holds the power

"to agree the Environment Agency's overall priorities and objectives" and "to allocate resources" accordingly. The Department has the capability to fix the issue. Now is the time for action.

What am I asking for? I am calling for an urgent review of the Environment Agency's initial decision; an immediate unannounced visit to the site, as well as repeated visits, with a team of Environment Agency officers to test the odours and count the thousands of flies; and a visit to neighbouring homes to see what my residents have to cope with and to take their concerns seriously.

When the Environment Agency wrote to me in April, it said that it would take appropriate steps after its previous visit, but what exactly has been done? I would appreciate it if the Minister outlined what the EA has done since the last visit to the site on 1 April. I would like to request an urgent meeting with the chief executive of the EA, because it has now got to that level, and I would like the Minister's support in securing such a meeting. A directive from the Minister and the Government to the EA is needed to get it to act, and to act with authority.

Finally, if the Berry Polymers recycling plant is found to have breached regulations, it should be shut down as a matter of urgency. I am not against recycling—as I say, I am absolutely pro recycling—but I cannot believe this plant was allowed to be sited so close to thousands of homes. I will conclude my speech by making it crystal clear to the Minister, the Environment Agency and Berry Polymers that I will not allow residents to suffer more of this and I will not stop fighting for my constituents until this is resolved.

7.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): I congratulate my hon. Friend and neighbour, the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western). I know his area well and he has made a powerful and compelling speech on behalf of his constituents. We have a commitment to transition to a circular economy and to try to prevent waste from occurring in the first place, but where it does occur we need to manage it in the most resource-efficient way possible. That is really important for the management of plastic waste. We want to minimise the use of plastics, and it is clear that we need to recycle them to prevent them from being landfilled or incinerated.

My hon. Friend has described a litany of distressing incidents, including the failure around planning permission being given for this light industrial estate so close to residents' houses and the dreadful examples of children asking their parents, "How can I eat my dinner without flies flying into my mouth?" That is something we would not wish on our worst enemies, and I am truly sorry that his constituents have had to put up with this terrible situation.

Plastics for recycling come from a wide range of sources across households and industry, and they need to be cleaned before recycling. That is a note to all of us when we chuck our dirty, unrinsed yoghurt pots into the recycling. Someone has to deal with them later on. There is no such place as "away". If we want the material to be suitable for remanufacture, we have to clean up our own mess before we hand it on for materials reprocessing. It is clear that, in this case, this activity has impacted on my hon. Friend's constituents.

We have regulations in place to protect communities. Recycling plants are holders of environmental permits. Those permits are issued by the Environment Agency and they impose conditions on operators about waste handling, in order to mitigate—that is, reduce—environmental risks such as odour and noise, as well as other pollution risks. The Environment Agency regulates the holders of those permits by making periodic visits to inspect activities, to ensure that they are in line with the conditions of the permit. I am pleased to hear that my hon. Friend has been conducting his own unannounced visits and I do hope he finds a way to continue them, or finds other people to do them for him in the event that he is barred. The EA works with the operators of facilities to ensure compliance, issuing through guidance and advice and, when necessary, serving notices on an operator to mandate actions to improve compliance, such as changes to how they carry out the work or how risks are managed.

I am really sorry that residents are experiencing odours and flies in South Leamington, Warwick Gates, Heathcote and Whitnash. The Environment Agency and Warwick district council have been working together to investigate these issues, but having heard what my hon. Friend has said tonight, I would advise him—I will do my best with this through my private office—to ensure that the Health and Safety Executive is also made aware of the unhygienic working practices that workers at that site are clearly experiencing. If it is bad in the neighbouring houses, I am keen to hear what it is like for people taking their breaks and eating their packed lunches on that site, because I cannot imagine that it meets modern working condition standards.

I understand that the Berry Polymers plant in Leamington Spa sources its material largely from municipal waste, which it cleans on site before recycling into material to go back into manufacturing. The site permit requires an odour management plan, which controls the treatment for the washing of plastic, as well as several other potentially odorous—that is, smelly—processes. As these activities are included in the permit, appropriate enforcement action can be taken should odours be assessed as contravening the plan. The odour management plan includes details about the storage and handling of incoming materials that are recognised as potentially odorous.

The current permit conditions in relation to the open water treatment plant to treat water used from the washing of plastics are being reviewed by the Environment Agency to ensure that all required conditions are in place to regulate the activity. I have a regular Environment Agency update and will be asking for regular updates on this plant and for it to be added to my risk update reporting.

The Environment Agency was first made aware of residents' fly issues in July 2023, as my hon. Friend says, with a volume of odour reports also being reported in

[Mary Creagh]

August. It visited two sites in the area regularly, including the Berry Polymers site, and required action to be taken to prevent risks of odours and flies. The actions were to implement fly monitoring, provide evidence of pest management training for staff, and consistently improve pest and odour management plans. As my hon. Friend says, this has been going on for nearly two years.

In January 2024, an external entomologist—an insect specialist—was contracted to conduct a site inspection. Following their recommendations, an improvement plan was produced with further actions. Fly control boards were installed at the plant to kill flies, and fly traps were also installed inside and out to kill flies and allow species of flies to be monitored.

The Environment Agency also asked for volunteers in the local community to conduct fly monitoring in their homes. I sort of agree with my hon. Friend when he asks, “Whose job is it?” I understand residents’ reluctance; only one person responded. Data collection and evidence are an important part of compliance and permit regulatory activity, so if we want action to be taken, we have to have the proof, so I recommend that he re-engages.

In August and September 2024, the monitoring recorded that numbers of flies were not at levels likely to cause distress. However, the Environment Agency continues to investigate all odour reports received and has undertaken 26 unannounced site inspections where odour has been assessed. An additional 11 odour assessments have been conducted in the local area, where sustained odour at levels likely to cause offence has not been identified. However, I take on board what my hon. Friend says about constituents vomiting in their cars as they drive past—he has given a graphic description of the impacts. An odour assessment was carried out on Saturday 1 March. Multiple locations within the locality were visited. Faint and sporadic odours were identified. However, these were not detected at the site boundary. Since March, odour reports have increased—again, it is a hot weather issue. There were 31 reports in March and 32 in April.

In April, the operator notified the Environment Agency of an issue with an on-site sedimentation tank and maintenance was carried out on 25 April to address it. On 15 April, the EA required the operator to provide further information regarding maintenance of the waste water treatment plant, staff training and odour monitoring. A response has been received and is being assessed. Officers carried out further off-site amenity checks on 25 April. No odour or notably elevated fly numbers were noted. A further site visit was conducted last week on 7 May, and no breaches were identified. There were no off-site amenity issues.

The EA is committed, as am I, to ensuring compliance at the facilities that it regulates and that all appropriate measures are in place. I think my hon. Friend will agree—he was very generous in his speech—that we have taken very swift action to tackle waste issues across the country. The EA will continue to respond to reports of odour and flies, and to proactively inspect Berry Polymers and any other permitted or exempt site in the area that it considers a potential source of flies or odour.

The local environment team and the local council have worked together to ensure that residents are kept up to date with investigations and findings through an online community page and monthly briefing notes, but I understand that residents might feel helpless and hopeless. I encourage them to continue taking action and to report fly, odour or noise issues linked to permitted sites, including Berry Polymers, through the 24-hour Environment Agency hotline on 0800 80 70 60. Those reports help the Environment Agency and partners to investigate and assess the impact of all issues.

Matt Western: I thank my hon. Friend for her comprehensive response. The frustration is that, after two years, there is real fatigue among the community about the district council, the Environment Agency and environmental health not listening and taking this problem seriously, so I do not think that we can just complete online forms and rely on them to respond. If Berry Polymers does not change, this is the last chance for it. We have seen video evidence of its washrooms, with flies flying around. The place needs shutting down if there is one more example of its failing to maintain proper conditions in the workplace or the wider environment.

Mary Creagh: I cannot, as a Minister, pass judgment on any permitted operator, as doing so could be prejudicial to any ongoing or potential enforcement action. My hon. Friend has had a letter from the Environment Agency—I have seen that letter. We must move from a world in which regulatory activity is focused on activity rather than on progress. I am very keen that the Environment Agency should make progress with the fly and odour issues that he has spoken about so eloquently.

I will, as I say, keep a close eye on this matter. I will push officials for clear and unambiguous action to ensure that, if we have another warm summer, my hon. Friend’s constituents are not suffering in what can only be described as utterly horrible and unacceptable living conditions.

Question put and agreed to.

7.37 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 14 May 2025

[PETER DOWD *in the Chair*]

Future of Public Libraries

9.30 am

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of public libraries.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. Public libraries are at the heart of our communities. They have incredible value, as I am sure we will hear from colleagues today, but they also have an important and underutilised role in delivering the Government's plan for change. I will talk briefly about the diverse and important roles that public libraries play in our society and the profound risks they face, and finally I will urge the Minister to work with colleagues to implement and go boldly beyond the recommendations of the Sanderson review.

That review, commissioned by the previous Government and published last year, calls on Government to develop a national strategy for public libraries. I thank the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals for supporting me to understand the challenge faced by libraries and articulate the need for change. It is good to see some friends from CILIP in the Public Gallery today.

The public library as we know it has been shaped and moulded by the laws and motions enacted in this place. It is 175 years since the Member of Parliament William Ewart, against much opposition, led the charge to introduce the Public Libraries Act 1850. The Act compelled boroughs to establish free public libraries, and it was the first legislative step in the creation of an enduring national institution that provides universal free access to trustworthy information. Opposition was rooted in the belief that knowledge was a volatile force, too potent for “the rough and poor”, who were seen as unfit to grasp or use it responsibly. Libraries, opponents warned, would become breeding grounds for unrest and lecture halls of unhealthy agitation, threatening social order. There is a sweet irony, then, in the face of an explosion of misinformation and a rapidly changing world, that libraries have become a rare beacon of trustworthy information where we can build our knowledge and skills with confidence. It may be that our democracy depends on it.

While I could spend my full time today waxing lyrical about the importance of libraries, I want to think more specifically about the needs they meet, more strategically about their role in delivering Government priorities, and more precisely about the value they contribute to the economy. Everybody knows that the public purse strings are tighter than they once were, but despite facing real-terms cuts of 49% since 2010, public libraries continue to produce immense educational, economic and social value. They have adapted in ways that William Ewart could not have imagined.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this important debate. In Somerset we have a huge number of libraries, and a recent independent review cited Somerset libraries as examples of excellence nationally. In community-managed libraries such as Castle Cary, links to carers' groups have been established. Does he agree that libraries must be kept well-funded and accessible, in recognition of their wide-ranging role in the community, and particularly rural communities?

Jonathan Davies: I do agree. We need more money for libraries, but we also need to find ways of collaborating and innovating, so that we can do more with less. The hon. Member makes a good point about rural communities; I thank her for that.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for securing the debate. Clearly, there is much agreement on the importance of public libraries, but in rural communities such as those in my constituency, access is often limited by insufficient transport and the rural premium associated with running services. Does he agree that the Government should urgently review steps to support access to rural libraries, so that constituencies such as mine are not left without these treasured community assets?

Jonathan Davies: I know the hon. Lady is a champion for rural communities and her constituents. The Government are looking carefully at public transport, but a national strategy for public libraries, which I will come to, could draw upon the issue she raises.

Many of our libraries have quietly evolved into digital learning centres, enterprise hubs and pillars of community wellbeing. Across the country brilliant initiatives have emerged, such as the Glass Box in Taunton, where people of all ages develop skills in 3D printing and programming in library spaces. There are initiatives such as Gloucestershire's library-led programme tackling loneliness among older people. Those are models that should be shared.

As many as 13.7 million adults used a library last year, not just for books but to study, get online and sometimes as a place to feel safe. I believe the Minister referred to libraries as “cultural diamonds” and I could not agree more. Baroness Twycross has noted that they are

“one of the last non-transactional spaces in our communities.”—
[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 12 September 2024; Vol. 839, c. GC140.]

It is hugely encouraging to see such clear appreciation and understanding of public libraries at the heart of Government.

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I congratulate him on securing this important debate. He mentioned community spaces. My borough of Haringey uses libraries as community spaces to encourage more people to use them, with various innovative ideas, such as the library late scheme. Libraries open later and get artists and musicians to make use of the community space that libraries are there to serve. Does he agree that is a good way to encourage diverse communities to access library spaces?

Jonathan Davies: I agree with my hon. Friend, who makes a good point. People might not think to use the library, but if something else gets them through the door it might prompt them to use it again in future.

Despite the hard work done on mitigation, adaptation and commercialisation, cuts to public services since 2010 have meant that, tragically, public libraries are disappearing. Since 2010 we have lost around 276 static libraries in England, although that could be a substantial underestimate, as we are losing about 40 a year. That is not to mention the loss of good jobs for the trained professionals who run them. That is clearly unsustainable, and must not be allowed to continue.

We know that the situation in local authorities is acute, with a number of councils issuing section 114 notices. Almost one in five English councils will rely on exceptional financial support from central Government this financial year. Although local authorities have a statutory requirement to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service, that requirement is vague and untested, leaving the service at risk of being targeted for savings and efficiencies.

I do not envy local authorities for the difficult choices they have to make. We have a false dichotomy, however, between long-term ambition and short-term crisis.

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. In the Derbyshire Dales libraries play a crucial role, hosting all kinds of community activities and providing space for the next generation to socialise and learn. They are a lifeline for those in the most remote and rural parts of the constituency, especially the elderly. The access that libraries give to the internet, and physical and digital services such as printing and archives, is vital for so many in our towns and villages. The previous Conservative council made significant cuts to opening times of local libraries, and the newly elected Reform group has made no promises to safeguard them. Does my hon. Friend acknowledge the urgent need to protect our local libraries from cuts, especially where they serve remote and rural communities?

Jonathan Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When the Conservatives ran Derbyshire county council until a matter of days ago, they signed off £625,000 of cuts to the library budget over four years. They did keep all the libraries open and they removed reservation fees for much of the stock. Credit where it is due—I welcome that. Savings were achieved through reduced opening hours, as my hon. Friend said. Reducing opening hours may be a difficult decision that some councils need to take to keep libraries open, but we know that the impact of those decisions will disproportionately be felt by people who already face a lack of opportunity, which is also true of library closures.

As my hon. Friend said, Derbyshire now has a Reformed council. We know very little about Reform's priorities for the authority or how it will run services. I urge the new Reform UK leaders of Derbyshire county council to recognise the value of local libraries and find innovative ways to work together, collaborating to help them grow.

I know the Minister will not be able to commit to putting more money into libraries, without a strong evidence base for what it will achieve. That strikes at the heart of the problem. We do not know what the extent of public library provision is. We do not know where it

is, what it does and what it could do. Regulated healthcare services are listed in a national database, with contact details for their leaders and information about what is being provided. A similar resource could be developed for libraries across local authorities, schools, colleges, universities, healthcare settings and prisons. It could show who can use them, the extent of their catalogues and the range of skills held by the professionals behind them. There are opportunities to use libraries for a range of activities, including commercial ones, which would help them deliver increased public value.

A national database could support collaboration between library and information professionals and allow the Government to better use the full portfolio of those services to support their skills and community cohesion agendas. That is why I echo calls from the other place for the Government to develop a full national strategy for public libraries, backed by robust data. Not only would that intervention produce savings by reducing demand on other services, but it would unlock significantly more value than it would cost to implement. A national strategy could help a child to get a better start in life, a parent to receive the support they need, a jobseeker to find a quiet and supportive place to search for work, somebody struggling to understand an important but confusing form that they need explaining to them, an entrepreneur to find a new niche, or an older person to safely pay a bill. All that is in addition to satisfying a thirst for knowledge, which seeks to understand and further the human condition.

Many local authorities already calculate the contributions that libraries make to public health initiatives, digital inclusion, adult education, tackling isolation and so much more, but too often that work is done to identify where the least harmful savings can be made. Other institutions, such as schools, jobcentres and the NHS, should know what libraries are contributing to their work, and so should central Government, but without reliable data we do not have a full picture of the value our libraries are delivering, nor can we fully understand what vulnerable or disadvantaged people and communities stand to lose when their libraries start to close.

Better data would also allow us to understand the regional inequalities that doubtless exist in the distribution of services. That is why a key recommendation of the Sanderson review was to establish a national data hub to serve as the evidence base for a national strategy. Much of the rest of the Sanderson review's recommendations can be implemented at little cost. They include the creation of a libraries laureate to champion the sector, automatic enrolment for children in the libraries run by their local council, support for the network of library volunteers who do so much more for their communities, and awareness days or branding for local libraries to tap into. When the Sanderson review was published, its recommendations were welcomed by the British Library, which has convening power and significant influence in the wider sector.

Based on the huge variety of activities and services that libraries deliver, it is clear that a national strategy must be cross-governmental. Even so, that work needs one person to hold the pen. Industry experts are concerned that libraries no longer appear in a ministerial title, and they would greatly appreciate it if that were restored. I hope the Government will reflect on that modest change.

I shall be grateful if the Minister would reflect on the Sanderson review and advise us on the Government's plans to deliver on its recommendations, including by providing a timeline of any actions and telling us whether he supports a national plan for libraries. I shall also be grateful if he tells us what conversations he is having with CILIP, the British Library, local authorities and representatives of the libraries sector about how we can work together to improve public library provision. Finally, it would be wonderful to know what representations the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has made to the Treasury to articulate the value of libraries and ask for more money for those vital resources.

It is wonderful to see so many Members from across the House in the Chamber to talk about why public libraries are so very important. I am excited to hear about the best practice from the areas they represent, the challenges their communities have faced and the life-changing impact that libraries have had on their constituents. I look forward to working with colleagues to deliver on the amazing promise of these truly amazing, special and unique places today and for generations to come.

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

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Thank you very much. That gives me the opportunity to say how much time people will have to speak, because I want to bring in the Opposition spokesperson and the Minister from 10.30 am. Back Benchers will have five minutes, but that may come down, depending on the level of interventions. I call Jim Shannon.

9.44 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Dowd. I did not expect to be called this early, but it is always a pleasure to speak in a debate and to serve under your chairship.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Jonathan Davies) on setting the scene so well. Libraries are obviously vastly important to him, as they are to me, from a constituency point of view. He is right to highlight the importance of public libraries across the United Kingdom. I speak from some experience: I used to serve in the Northern Ireland Assembly on the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, and part of that responsibility was for libraries in Northern Ireland, including libraries in my Strangford constituency. Public libraries are services that are much loved and must be protected, so it is great to be here to discuss them.

It is always good to see the Minister in his place. I look forward to his contribution and to hearing what the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French), and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for North Devon (Ian Roope), have to say about libraries.

My constituency has many wonderful libraries, including Newtownards library, which was recently refurbished; Killyleagh library, which has also been refurbished; and Ballynahinch library. Libraries are not just about books; they are also about events that can happen in them.

They are always related to books, or along those lines, but they are available for different events. Last Friday there was a VE Day event at Killyleagh library, and it was a pleasure to be there. An author from Belfast spoke about his book on the Jewish people who came to Northern Ireland during the second world war. It was a lovely occasion. I think the ambience of the library added to the occasion. The subject matter was very pertinent to the area, because many Jewish people came to live in Killyleagh and their contribution to the society was incredible. I will remember that event on Friday for a long time.

In a world in which our phones and being online can dominate our time, it is fantastic that our community libraries can be upheld. Last year I was fortunate to be given some children's books at an event here in Westminster. I met staff from the local library back home in Newtownards, and gave the books to the library so that they could in turn use them and give them to children.

The hunger and eagerness of children who read books encourages me greatly. I have six grandchildren. Every one of them, even the wee ones—the youngest are three and four—has devoured books. I was at an event downstairs in Parliament today about eating habits. It had nothing to do with this issue, but one of the things it was about was encouraging children to eat their greens. I am very fortunate because my last two grandchildren, the three-year-old and four-year-old, do not have to be encouraged to eat their greens, or to read books, but it is really important that we do that.

For young children, reading has so many benefits, including for cognitive brain development and enhancing language. I have been shocked in the past, when attending different libraries, by the sheer variety of literature offered. I do not think there is one individual who would struggle to find a book suited to them. In addition to reading, our libraries offer crucial services by providing access to computers and printing and serving as community hubs. There are knit and natter groups for the elderly: they come and do a bit of knitting and they natter for ages—well, they certainly did whenever I was there. Schools will often have libraries, but they also do visits to community libraries for talks and so on, or to meet the authors of popular books.

Libraries NI is fantastic in offering mobile libraries for rural villages that perhaps do not have decent access to library services. This gives constituents who are more isolated, and especially older people, an opportunity to get out and about and engage with others. In Northern Ireland, the arrival of a mobile library to homes across a rural constituency means a lot. Banks and retail shops have gone online and disappeared from the community, but libraries, including mobile libraries, are still there. I hope that our library services will not be left behind and that local libraries across the whole United Kingdom will continue to be funded so that they can remain open.

I will conclude, because I am conscious of the time and the five-minute limit. So many people of a wide variety of ages love and rely on our library services. We must protect libraries through additional funding and the encouragement of their use, so that more people apply for library cards and take advantage of these wonderful services. Our libraries are very much part of the community.

9.49 am

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): I have said before in this place that libraries are the NHS for the soul. They are funded by our taxes, free at the point of use and there when we need them the most. Libraries are no longer just about borrowing books, although that is still reason enough to love them; they are community hubs, digital lifelines, maker spaces, job centres and warm welcomes all in one. They offer a helping hand, a listening ear and a gateway to opportunity. They improve, enrich and inspire us. A library can change a life, whether it is a child discovering a love of reading, an adult learning new skills or someone finding the support they need to turn their life around. Libraries are the crown jewels of our communities. As with anything precious, they deserve to be cherished, protected and given everything they need to thrive.

Yet today, too many libraries are simply trying to survive. Years of being in the crosshairs of local authority budget cuts have taken their toll. But never underestimate a community that hears that its local library is under threat. The quietest places often have the loudest defenders, and they have a formidable arsenal of defensive weapons available—including, of course, paper cuts. Let us remember that libraries are not a luxury: they are a lifeline—a non-negotiable part of community life.

I have loved libraries since I was five, although I admit that a library was also the first place I ever got fined, and the only place where I have accidentally triggered a bomb scare. I like to think that I have got better at using them responsibly since then. One of my earliest memories is being taken to Bannockburn library by my mum, who told me to pick any book I wanted. I remember being overwhelmed by the choice and thrilled by the freedom. I walked out with a book on Roman warships that sparked a lifelong love of history and libraries. I should also admit that I did not walk it back in until well after the book was due, and I got a fine for my trouble. Happily, in Stirling today it has been many years since a Labour-led council did away with library fines, because no one should face a financial penalty for enjoying a book.

When I was 15 and walking home from orchestra practice, I popped into the library and lost track of time. I left my clarinet in its black case under a table. The next day it was sitting at the police station, after being assessed as a potential security threat to the then Secretary of State for Scotland, who had spoken at the community centre that evening. Let us just say that the local sergeant gave me a very firm talking to when I went to collect it.

In Stirling and Strathallan, we are proud of our library heritage. The Leighton library in Dunblane—the oldest purpose-built library in Scotland—has offered books since 1687; the Smith Art Gallery and Museum included a public reading room when it opened in 1874; and Stirling's first modern public library was opened in 1904, thanks to Andrew Carnegie's generosity. That spirit lives on today, most recently when 270 donations from local residents funded the award-winning Thomas Graham library in Strathblane.

Across Stirling and Strathallan we have 18 libraries and two mobile library vans, serving almost 70,000 people across almost 2,500 square kilometres. And our libraries are busy, from Bannockburn library's award-winning maker space to the fantastic Off the Page book festival,

which is happening right now in libraries across my constituency. The University of Stirling's libraries and archives, including the Scottish political archive, remind us that libraries are also stewards of our shared history.

Libraries are free, welcoming and open to all. They are where a child can fall in love with reading, someone can retrain for work, and a lonely person can find connection. In the rush to balance budgets, we must not lose sight of what libraries give us and what we lose if we let them slip away. Libraries are not a luxury; they are a lifeline. Books can open doors, but libraries hold the keys to those doors. Let us not lock the doors on future generations by undervaluing and under-investing in our libraries. Libraries ask for very little and give us everything in return. If we value community, we must value our libraries. Let us protect them, promote them and make sure that they are there—open, welcoming and thriving—for generations to come.

9.54 am

Anna Sabine (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I thank the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Jonathan Davies) for securing this debate.

I want to talk about the future of public libraries in my fairly rural constituency. In particular, I wish to highlight the role of Radstock library, one of 11 community-run libraries in Bath and North East Somerset. Although the council supports the core service, providing book deliveries and the library system, it is the local community that keeps its doors open. In Radstock's case, the council provides the staff, premises and IT, but for libraries without council support it is a real struggle.

The value of community-run libraries is immense. In Radstock the library is much more than a place to borrow books. People come to use the public computers and printers, which are vital in a digital age. They come to read, to study, to hot-desk and to connect. The library runs events such as Lego club and knit and natter, and hosts Read Easy and employment skills sessions, diabetes workshops and the local food club.

In a cost of living crisis, libraries provide something incredibly powerful: a free, warm, welcoming space where people can learn, access essential services and find community. Radstock library relies heavily on volunteers to run it day to day, and it matters now more than ever.

We must not forget our rural areas, where mobile libraries remain a lifeline. I would like to make sure that they are considered in this debate and in any future library strategy.

Sarah Dyke: My hon. Friend is right: Somerset council operates many mobile libraries across the county, which provide a lifeline to rural villages in Glastonbury and Somerton such as Penselwood, Beercrocombe, Norton-sub-Hamdon, and Baltonsborough, to name a few. The cost of delivering library services has increased, and the recent spiralling costs are coupled with years of under-investment by the previous Conservative administration in Somerset. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must prioritise funding for local government, because without it vital services like libraries will be vulnerable to cost cutting?

Anna Sabine: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The risk with mobile libraries is that, in terms of numbers, they may not necessarily have as much footfall as a static library, but they provide much more to local communities than can be quantified in footfall. Not everyone lives near a town library, and mobile services are often the only point of access to books, the internet or advice for isolated residents. They also keep people connected, especially older residents and those without transport. From meeting the staff of the mobile library in the Somerset village of Rode in my constituency, I know that they also provide a useful early warning if someone in the village needs extra support or is vulnerable.

The function of libraries has changed dramatically over the past 20 or 30 years, but their importance is growing. If we want to tackle isolation, digital exclusion and inequality, we must protect and properly support both our community-run and mobile library services.

9.56 am

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Jonathan Davies) for securing this timely debate.

Public libraries are critical community centres that educate and enlighten. They are used disproportionately by people from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. In December 2022, in my Folkestone and Hythe constituency, our main library in Folkestone town centre closed, and it has remained closed since. The library opened to the public in its current location in 1888. It is one of the oldest Carnegie libraries in the country and operated in a beautiful grade II listed building at Grace Hill.

In 2024, Folkestone was named the best place to live in the south-east of England by *The Sunday Times*, but there is a high level of inequality in my constituency. Three wards in the town are among the 10% most deprived in the UK, and Folkestone library has played a critical role in supporting many people, including families and elderly people who are living in poverty. The library was not some relic of the past. It was not merely a borrow-a-book service, but had become a hub for the community. It had free wi-fi and computers, it put on activities and events, and there was a local heritage service for local historical materials.

I do not want to talk too much about the Conservatives, but the sad reality was that the library, run under Kent county council, had been neglected and was allowed to get into a state of disrepair so that, today, the cost of repairing the building is around £3 million. That would have been much less had the repairs been carried out when they ought to have been.

Kent county council is now run by Reform. One of the first things said by the new leader of the KCC, Linden Kemkaran, was that she wanted to “appoint some sort of DOGE”.

I took that as a reference to the Elon Musk-led US Government body responsible for savage cuts in the US, including in education. I gently suggest to her that after 14 years of Tory austerity, savage cuts are not what we need. I call on the new leader of Kent county council to commit to saving Grace Hill library, and to work with me and local stakeholders to make that happen.

I have never given up on reopening Folkestone library. I believe it has a future. Tying the library to the existing tide of Folkestone’s regeneration is crucial. Both national and regional government should support regeneration that has already proved successful. We need regeneration to help to fund libraries, and in Folkestone that regeneration has already happened to a degree, through the development of the creative industries over the last 20 years. There is a proposal to extend that further, with a new creative campus that would make arts an even stronger magnet for creativity and economic growth. The library is part of that. A £10 million investment in the creative campus could deliver a curriculum for creatives, creating a multi-use arts and communal space, space for the community to gather, a library offer and so on.

As a community, we know that if we want to reopen the library, we need to be creative and think outside the box. I thank the Minister for coming down to see what Creative Folkestone has done. Alastair Upton, the chief executive officer of Creative Folkestone, and I were incredibly grateful to the Minister for giving up his time to see how Folkestone is leveraging the arts to regenerate our community.

I pay tribute to Jon O’Connor and the Save Folkestone Library campaign, who have collected thousands of signatures and worked really hard to come up with a community vision for the library. It is that spirit of campaigning that will keep libraries alive. As others have said, the future of libraries has to be based on what already works. It also has to be based on regeneration and rely on sources of funding other than traditional funding models. Upskilling the creative campus idea would allow the teaching of existing creatives and provide a hub for activity of all kinds.

I believe that through strong campaigning, determination and thinking creatively about the future, Folkestone library can be saved, but it will need the help and support of the new Reform-run Kent county council. I will seek to meet the new leader of the council and whoever is in charge there to make sure that the library reopens for the good of the people of Folkestone.

10.1 am

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd.

I have a pub quiz question for the Minister: which historic figure has the greatest number of busts in the United States? People might say George Washington or Abraham Lincoln, but the truth is that it is Robbie Burns. That is because, as the hon. Member for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane) referred to, Andrew Carnegie paid for a huge number of libraries in the States and one of the conditions was that each library had to have a bust of Scotland’s national bard.

Another interesting fact—I am obviously on form today—is that Andrew Carnegie also built many libraries across Scotland and all over the UK, and indeed all over the world. He put one in particular in the village near his castle of Skibo in Sutherland—in the village hall, the building of which he also paid for. So, we can say that in the world there are two Carnegie Halls. The great-grandson of Andrew Carnegie, Mr William Thomson, tried in recent times to get Dolly Parton to come and sing in Sutherland’s Carnegie Hall, but sadly she demurred.

[*Jamie Stone*]

Like the hon. Member for Stirling and Strathallan, when I was a boy I visited the Carnegie library in my home town of Tain. I did rather worse than running up a fine; I actually lost a book. It was Enid Blyton's "Five Get Into A Fix" and losing it put me in a hell of a fix. I avoided going to the library for the next two years because I was petrified of the librarian, Mr Sellar. It was only later, when I was at secondary school, that I took up the habit of using a lending library. Today I am still a member of my lending library in Tain and use it regularly.

In 1909, one of my predecessors as the MP for the north of Scotland, Sir Arthur Bignold, presented a stuffed crocodile to Wick's Carnegie library, and it is still there. I have no intention of following in Sir Arthur Bignold's footsteps; I do not have any stuffed crocodiles handy at the moment.

I will cite a couple of facts. A recent survey showed that 16% of the Scottish population visit a library once a week, and slightly over a third visit a library once every month. I will not try to elaborate on the excellent points that have already been made about how important libraries are to civil society. As others have said, old people use them. I remember the demise of bookshops being predicted some years ago; some people thought that the internet would get rid of them. That is not the case, because books are selling more now than ever before. Books are part of the way that we do things as human beings, whatever language and whatever form they are in. Like others, I see libraries as crucial to the happiness of society.

Finally, rather than posing another pub quiz question to the Minister, I will say that I very much look forward to hearing his response to the debate; I am sure that it will contain a lot about best practice and proposals. Would he be kind enough to share his thoughts with the Scottish Government at an appropriate point? I am sad that there are no representatives of the Scottish Government here, but we see a worrying number of closures north of the border. I completely understand that this is a devolved matter, but I am duty bound to take up my constituents' concerns.

10.5 am

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): What a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Jonathan Davies) for securing this important debate.

When most people think of libraries, they picture buildings in disrepair—defunct, disused and on the verge of imminent closure. It should not have to be this way, and I am pleased to say that, in Ilford, it is not. In Ilford, we have protected our libraries. We have made them more than just places to borrow books; we made them places for families to come together, residents to exercise and communities to learn about our local history. Across the whole of Redbridge, our libraries are now state of the art, with air conditioning, refurbished reference areas, upgraded stock with 50% new titles, meeting spaces, modern public toilets, free wi-fi, and new computers and iPads. Some are now open from 6 am to 10 pm.

We achieved that in the face of the past 15 years of Conservative austerity, which gutted our local budgets.

As council leader, I knew that we had to be bold. From policing to parking, and from youth centres to libraries, we refused to accept decline.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): The hon. Member was leader of Redbridge council, which neighbours my borough of Havering, and I congratulate him on managing to keep the libraries in Ilford open. Will he explain, however, why the Labour and Havering Residents Association-run council that neighbours Redbridge has not managed to do the same, such that Gidea Park library, South Hornchurch library and Harold Wood library are closing? Surely we should make libraries community hubs and keep them alive for everyone to use and enjoy.

Jas Athwal: Politicians have to realise that they are in control and can make decisions. Nobody comes into politics to manage decline; we come into politics because we want to make a difference. In 2010, when Redbridge council was run by the Conservatives, the first thing they put on the table for closure was Goodmayes library, which is open to this day, because we refused to close it.

To some, what I have described may be small issues, but they are vital to the health and wellbeing of our communities and our children. That is why, despite relentless pressure to retreat and to do less with less, we chose to invest in rather than divest from our library services. We pioneered the co-location model, transforming our libraries into vibrant, multi-user community hubs, as the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) just mentioned.

Our Woodford Green library is also a gym. The library's health, fitness and diet books are strategically placed so that they are there to greet people as they walk towards the gym, and are there when people come out, so they can take books on all the exercise they have done. Redbridge central library, where I host my surgeries, is a museum and has a busy cafeteria. Hainault library is a children's centre and community hub. These are models of good practice that could and should be shared under the type of national library strategy for which my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire is asking.

In Ilford, our libraries do more than just provide books and study spaces; they are community spaces to meet, learn about our history and exercise. That is what we can achieve when we put our residents at the heart of decision making. Innovative solutions do exist; we just have to be bold enough to deliver them. When we are told to shut down, we have to say that we will invest. That is how we secured the future of our public libraries, and I hope that a similar solution finds its way into a national library strategy.

10.9 am

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Jonathan Davies) on securing this debate. The Chamber is very well attended, and rightly so; libraries remain at the heart of our communities.

Libraries are more than just books. They offer computer and internet access, host local community groups and provide safe spaces for those who need it. Library staff, supported by volunteers, are pillars of the community. They help those who are most vulnerable, such as the

elderly, children and jobseekers. Even throughout the pandemic, libraries adapted to lockdown, and began to provide online services and activities, including e-books. Those services will have supported many families throughout those difficult times, and many would have struggled without them.

I am passionate about all children having access to a quality education, and libraries help to provide that. They provide the environment for children to be curious and have imagination. I am lucky enough to have Harry Potter world in my constituency. JK Rowling's ability to read previous authors, like the Enid Blytons of the world, would have driven the imagination that allowed her to create the vision that we all enjoy today. Statistics show that about two thirds of children aged 15 visit the library each year in London. They use them in multiple ways by borrowing books, or using computers, printing facilities or study spaces. Nowhere else can offer all those things.

I am lucky enough to have six libraries in my constituency of South West Hertfordshire: Abbots Langley, Chorleywood Community, Croxley Green, Kings Langley Community, Oxhey and Rickmansworth. I am a regular user of those libraries, hiring meetings rooms at Croxley Green to meet constituents and to discuss a library link scheme. Croxley Green is a tier 2 library, meaning it is a community-focused, small library. Its library link scheme allows residents to request specialised research from a librarian. It also ran a slipper project, encouraging elderly people to bring in their old slippers to be replaced with new ones to keep them warm in the winter.

Rickmansworth library has unfortunately been closed for a number of months due to a refurbishment following a fire. Understandably, locals are concerned because they do not have access to the library services. I know that the county council is providing some of those services off site, but I will continue to work with Hertfordshire county council, whoever the new leader is, to ensure that my community keeps the services that it has had over many years. I do not want Rickmansworth library to be one of the 2,276 libraries that have closed since 2016.

Instead of seeing libraries close, we should be seeking plans to open new ones—for example, in Leavesden in my constituency, which does not have a local library. In England and Wales, only 78% of the population are within a 30-minute walk of a public library. We should be investing to increase that percentage. The Conservative Government committed to publishing a public library strategy, which the election unfortunately prevented.

Chris Kane: On the location of libraries, certainly in Scotland, there is a statutory duty is to provide a library service. That means that only one library could be provided for my constituency of nearly 2,500 sq km. Does the hon. Member agree that access and proximity to the library in terms of travel time is important to any strategy?

Mr Mohindra: I wholeheartedly agree, especially for some of our more rural communities. There are modern ways of solving that problem, including mobile libraries, which allow communities to have access for a few hours each week to a van that drives around, and books can be pre-ordered via an online system.

Will the Minister commit the Government to publishing a public library strategy? I am sure that members of the wider community would be keen to hear the direction of travel.

I congratulate Hertfordshire library services, which is celebrating its 100th anniversary. We should support all counties to continue offering these services, so that libraries can remain the strong community hubs they have been for so long.

10.14 am

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Jonathan Davies) for securing a vital debate.

As has been said many times, libraries are not just buildings or physical things; they are an emblem of what communities are, particularly in my constituency, which includes sparsely populated areas of rural Northumberland. They play a crucial role in bringing together those communities, and they foster educational thought and development.

I would like to mention a few of our fantastic libraries: the Spetchells centre in Prudhoe, Northumberland library in Heddon-on-the-Wall, Haltwhistle library, Wylam library, Bellingham library, and the Allendale, Newburn and Crawcrook libraries. My office is located upstairs at the Queen's Hall library; it is good to have a space at the library that allows me, as an MP, to be based within the community. In Matfen, there is an old telephone box that has been transformed into a book swap shop for residents. I commend Hannah Cutler, a resident from that village, for her valuable contribution to the local community.

It is clear that libraries offer much more than educational material; they are hubs for social interaction, and for communities to share thought. In rural communities and in the fractured social media environment that we live in, that is perhaps more valuable now than ever. The opportunity to have safe, local spaces through which we can curb social isolation with shared community experiences is vital. This morning, I was reading a study that said that one in five children in the north-east do not own a book. I sincerely hope that by the end of this Labour Government's time in office, we have combated that appalling statistic.

In my constituency, town councils do excellent work in libraries by hosting events such as green jobs fairs and events for the Ukrainian community, who have settled in my constituency since the outbreak of war in Europe and have made a fantastic contribution. Those events bring them, and some of the host families, together as a community. It is a privilege, every week, to look at the "What's On" in the community libraries and see the different ways that communities are coming together.

Obviously, representing the largest constituency in England—which I think I am contractually obliged to mention every time I rise to speak—I do not manage to get to all the libraries every week, but I try my best. We try to hold our surgeries in every library that I have mentioned, because I think that is crucial.

It is now Mental Health Awareness Week. When we invest in libraries, we are not just investing in literacy; we are investing in mental health support, digital access

[Joe Morris]

and in the futures of the residents themselves. In the brief time that I have left, I will talk about rural primary schools and their libraries.

Jamie Stone: The hon. Gentleman is making a valid point about mental health. Does he agree that for many people in their old age, visiting a library is one way of combating loneliness, which is one of the tragedies for them?

Joe Morris: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. That is true not just for old people; in the communities I represent, people who work from home often go to the library and take advantage of that opportunity to get into town. It is tremendously valuable for everyone of all ages. I recognise his point, however, about older people in particular.

I will briefly mention Otterburn primary school, which is one of the smallest schools in the country, in one of the most isolated villages. Staff at the school do tremendous work. The school benefits from a breakfast club, but it is also, through the library, giving children access to books. It was a pleasure to visit the school fairly recently, and to talk about the infrastructure challenges that it faces as an extremely rural school.

10.18 am

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate with you in the Chair, Mr Dowd. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Jonathan Davies) for bringing forward this debate. It is an honour to celebrate the public library and the dedicated librarians who have kept them going in recent years.

Libraries are more than buildings filled with knowledge and books; they encapsulate who we are. Funded by our taxes, free at the point of need and delivery, they are the cornerstones of education, equality and opportunity in our country. Dr Seuss said, and he could not have put it better, that

“The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you’ll go.”

I think that sums up the value of the library.

The public library is a safe space for people of all ages and backgrounds to explore their imagination. I feel embarrassed to say this in front of the Minister, who is a very learned gentleman—the writer of nine books—but the library provided me with my earliest opportunities to read. I explored Enid Blyton, “Goosebumps”, “Point Horror”, “The Hardy Boys”, sometimes even Nancy Drew books. I moved on to Ed McBain, Michael Crichton and Stephen King. I also explored Shakespeare, Austen and Dickens, but the lion’s share of what I learned was probably at the lower end of the cultural spectrum. It put me in a good position to learn, to be curious, to enjoy reading and to develop that lifelong habit. I want my constituents in Bournemouth East to be able to develop that too.

The public library also provided me with something important. I grew up in poverty, caring for two young disabled parents. If I had not had a public library on my doorstep where I could go to complete my homework in a warm, safe space, I do not think I would have

been elected as an MP. Were it not for the kind eyes of librarians who looked at young children and saw potential and something they wanted to nourish, I do not think I could serve as the Member of Parliament for Bournemouth East. I want to thank the librarians around our country, and particularly those in my constituency, who have gone not just the extra mile but the extra 100 miles to keep libraries going in the face of significant cuts.

Since 2010, UK public libraries have lost around £232.5 million. That is because of cuts by the Conservative Government to the budgets of local authorities of all political colours and that decrease in funding being passed on. We have seen the closure of 800 libraries since 2010 and a loss of librarians, with their numbers going down from 24,000 in 2009 to 15,000 in 2018. That is a travesty.

In Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole council, where my constituency is based, in the last financial year we have seen hundreds of thousands of pounds taken out of libraries’ budgets by the Liberal Democrat alliance, reckoning with the mismanagement of council funds by the previous Conservative administration and the Conservative austerity that was passed on to it. The budget set by the three towns alliance caused libraries to shorten their opening hours and close for an extra day a week. The *Bournemouth Daily Echo* says that opening times were cut by an average of 10 hours per week per library across BCP. In response to the public consultation on that budget, 60% of respondents disagreed with the proposed closing times that have been introduced. Many staff have had their hours reduced, and some have left, which is a sad loss of valued and experienced people.

The Labour group in BCP council spoke against those cuts, particularly as the library strategy was yet to be published. It argued against the closures and changes to opening times and asked for a far more strategic approach, while acknowledging the funding pressures. Trying to be proactive and solutions-focused, the group said that no two neighbouring libraries should be closed on the same days at the same times and that we should see libraries as community hubs rather than just lenders of books.

That speaks to the challenge faced by our public library system. Although providing a library service is a key statutory function for councils, the quality and quantity of that service is up to the council; it is dependent on the funding that the council makes available. When we have such a crisis in social care, which is increasing the cost that councils have to bear, those who fall behind will be people who use libraries. We need a radical solution to social care and local government funding, which I know is beyond the Minister’s remit, but it is part of thinking strategically about what local councils mean in this day and age and what role libraries play in the delivery of services by local councils.

I want to echo what many Members have said about libraries being a critical place for MPs to hold their surgeries. I have held my surgeries in Boscombe, Castlepoint, Charminster, Pokesdown and Southbourne, and Springbourne libraries. In fact, the only library I have not held a surgery in is Tuckton, because it is too small. In going to those libraries, meeting the staff and bringing constituents into them, I have seen just how loved those libraries are, not just as places that lend books but as places where people can get guidance, advice and support.

In conclusion, it is important that we provide the funding that libraries need, but it is also important that we provide the funding to councils with a clear definition of what their roles are, so that libraries do not lose out. I thank the dedicated librarians of Bournemouth East, and although we are talking about public libraries, I also thank the House of Commons Library, which is a brilliant institution that has served MPs well. I have benefited enormously from it, and every time I go in, I am greeted with a smile and a significant amount of knowledge, so I want to say a huge thank you to the House of Commons Library staff.

10.24 am

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Jonathan Davies) on securing this important debate. Public libraries are at the heart of our communities, and we urgently need a national strategy to protect and strengthen them.

In 2016, North Yorkshire council faced the devastating prospect of closing 31 libraries. Instead, communities were given the chance to step in—and they did. In Scarborough, we are really fortunate that the Newby and Scalby library was one of the lucky few, and that local volunteers formed a charity to keep it open. Today, it is thriving. It has 60 volunteers, including trustees, gardeners, cleaners and 40 library assistants.

In 2024 alone, those volunteers gave over 11,000 hours. Their dedication has led to 42,000 visits and 550 events for 6,000 attendees, and has helped 1,500 people with individual IT assistance, bus passes, passport applications and how to use a mobile phone. They also run a home library service. That is not just a library; it is vital social infrastructure. Earlier this year, I was honoured to attend the celebrations as the Newby and Scalby volunteers received the King's award for voluntary service.

Although we must champion our community libraries, volunteers cannot be expected to keep them open indefinitely, especially as funding continues to shrink. According to the University of Warwick, library funding has fallen by more than half since 2010. Libraries are looking to the Government for a long-term plan that includes a sustainable funding model. I would be grateful if the Minister could address when the Government intend to implement the recommendations of the 2023 Sanderson review, including the establishment of a libraries laureate.

The title “libraries laureate” conjures up a Pied Piper figure, leading a trail of word-hungry children into the book corner, but it is, of course, nothing of the kind. They would be a high-profile, distinct voice who could advocate on behalf of libraries, and raise awareness of what books can provide and, as we have heard from many Members today, what libraries can provide beyond books. Libraries provide human contact in a world in which loneliness and the company of a smartphone are on the rise.

In the old days, people were fined when they had an overdue library book, but these days they can steal a library book and use it to write another book, or anything else. Library book borrowers cannot do that, of course, but if someone is the owner of an AI company, they can use books uploaded to the internet to train

AI models. We must protect the rights of authors, otherwise we face a future short on not only libraries, but the creative working people who write the books that fill the shelves.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Before I call the Opposition spokesperson, can Members bear in mind that I want to give the sponsor the opportunity to wind up at the end?

10.28 am

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Jonathan Davies) for securing this important debate, and all hon. Members for their passionate contributions. The Liberal Democrats believe in keeping libraries well funded and accessible, recognising their role in promoting literature, people skills and public wellbeing. Public libraries are some of the most beloved community services, and we are all painfully aware that despite the statutory duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service, many local authorities across the country have tried to find financial savings in this area.

Speaking as a lifelong councillor and a council leader, I know the hard choices that many local authorities are facing. Many will be trying to either consolidate library services, reduce opening hours or delay important building repairs. Research by the BBC suggests that at least 190 libraries in the UK have closed in the last five years, and the potential long-term consequences are troubling. Shockingly, the UK has one of the lowest rankings for teenage literacy among OECD countries, which affects the personal attainment and life chances of young people. It is in a library that many children first learn that books can be chosen and read for fun, not just assigned for homework by a teacher.

The last Government's independent review of public libraries, published in 2023, highlighted a lack of awareness of what libraries achieve, not just among the public but across local and national Government, which is compounded by a lack of adequate reporting on their good work. Libraries are vital to many marginalised adults in our society, including the elderly, those living in poverty or in social isolation, the unemployed or those with limited digital and literacy skills. They offer somewhere that is free to use, safe and easily accessible with a wealth of important information on everything from jobseeking to medical advice. The library is a lifeline.

I have not mentioned all the adopted uses of libraries: as a venue for a vast range of community events, support groups, employment workshops, live music, art and craft activities, flexible working spaces, and access to the internet and public records, among many other functions. Braunton library in my constituency of South Devon recently won south-west England's library of the year award at the British Book Awards. Among the features that make the library stand out is reading initiatives, its popular children's Lego club, social groups like “knit and natter”, and an Arts Council project called “The Gatherers” which brought local people and resettled Afghan families into a flower-collecting society to break down language and cultural barriers and help to integrate people more fully into British society.

As Liberal Democrats, we welcome the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's announcement in February of an additional £5.5 million for the libraries

[Ian Roome]

improvement fund, but it is likely that other Departments owe a debt of gratitude to public libraries that is not fully recognised. Even a small public library such as Braunton library holds over 300 community events annually. That is a typical example of the way public libraries are being asked to pick up ever wider duties from other public services. In England, 30% of adults aged 16 and over—around 13 million adults—have used a public library in the past 12 months; 27% of them brought a child with them, and the most recent figures suggest as that many as two thirds of all children in England visit a library at least once a year.

Our libraries are a public service with a colossal reach into communities. They represent people who sometimes have a very quiet voice in public debates. The Liberal Democrats would be open and flexible to ensuring a sustainable funding solution, including a review of the good causes eligible for lottery funding and possible mechanisms for library endowments. Libraries support lifelong learning and social cohesion, yet they are being asked to do far more with far less. We must ensure that in the future, the funding of libraries reflects the increasing diversity of the roles they fulfil.

10.32 am

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): It is a great honour to serve under your chairmanship again today, Mr Dowd. I start by thanking the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Jonathan Davies) for securing this important debate. It is great to hear from Members from across the House and across the country, and I thank them for championing libraries in their constituencies.

Libraries matter; they are one of the few places in public life where people of all ages and backgrounds are welcomed in without cost or condition. Whether it is a child discovering books for the first time, students revising for exams, pensioners playing bridge or Scrabble, or those needing digital support or wi-fi to apply for jobs, libraries quietly meet a range of needs every single day. Baroness Sanderson put it very well in the other place:

“no matter who you are or where you are from, you can walk into any library in the country and ask for help. In return, you will be asked for precisely nothing.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 12 September 2024; Vol. 839, c. GC128.]—

well, apart from maybe to return your book on time.

That civic spirit, quiet, constant and universal, defines the best of what public services should be, and demand for libraries nationally continues to highlight this popular public service. Recent published data from DCMS highlights that nearly one in three adults in England—around 13.7 million people—have used a library in the last year. As we all know, libraries are a statutory service under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, and rightly so, but how they are delivered is a matter for local councils. That is consistent with the principles that we Conservatives believe in: local services delivered by local people, community engagement, and fiscal responsibility.

It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the challenges of funding and provision that local authorities and libraries face. As a former local councillor, I understand the scale of those challenges for many councils, and the new duties and demands on precious resources, but it is

not all doom and gloom, as my home area has demonstrated. In my borough of Bexley, the Conservative-run council has built two new state-of-the-art libraries, in Sidcup and Thamesmead. The Sidcup library on the high street has been extremely popular since its opening, with a new cinema, and was very busy when I visited on Saturday to view the fantastic VE Day display arranged by the Lamorbey and Sidcup local history society, alongside brilliant local archive and history volunteers. Old Bexley, Sidcup and Welling was home to Roald Dahl for part of his life, as it was for other creative talent such as Quentin Blake, Roger Moore and, perhaps most famous, Gary Oldman, who portrayed Winston Churchill in the motion picture “Darkest Hour”. Lots of entertainment for readers and film fans comes from Bexley, and I hope many will enjoy it during this summer’s reading challenge. I am happy to support the people taking part in that this year in our libraries.

Councils across the country have adapted creatively to the challenging backdrop for libraries in the online age. From traditional council-run libraries to commissioned trusts and community-supported services, delivery models have evolved, but the mission remains unchanged: to provide a comprehensive and efficient service that meets the needs of local people. I take this opportunity to thank all library professionals around the country, but particularly those in Bexley and the House of Commons Library, and the incredible volunteers at Blackfen community library in my constituency, which has gone from strength to strength since opening as a real community hub in Blackfen. I am proud to support it throughout the year.

That library and the new Sidcup library on the high street highlight the powerful role that libraries can play in generating local economic activity and footfall in town centres. That point has not been made much today, but it is important. In government, the Conservatives supported that evolution. Through the libraries improvement fund, we invested more than £20 million to help modernise buildings, improve digital access and ensure that libraries remained fit for purpose in the 21st century. We commissioned the independent review of English public libraries, excellently led by Baroness Sanderson, which laid out a practical vision for renewal through stronger data, better branding, wider membership and deeper community connections. We supported the idea of a universal library card, a national data hub and closer alignment with institutions such as the British Library to strengthen the sector’s long-term sustainability. This is not about centralisation; it is about enabling the sector to thrive by giving it the tools, visibility and consistency it needs.

We must acknowledge the vital role that libraries played during the coronavirus outbreak, which my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) mentioned. They moved swiftly online, offering ebooks, streamed activities and virtual learning. In the most difficult circumstances, libraries kept people connected to culture, community and one another.

We must be honest though. We understand that local councils face financial pressures, which are being made worse by the Government’s Budget decisions. Bexley council is already £5 million worse off this year, so it has to make more difficult decisions. I encourage councils in that situation to look at the community library model, which has worked well in my constituency and

has prevented closures. We must help councils to protect core services while encouraging partnerships, co-location with other services and volunteer engagement where appropriate. I urge the Government to build on the momentum of the cross-party Sanderson review, which provided a road map that balances modernisation with the values that have always underpinned public libraries: access, education, community and trust.

It is disappointing that a refreshed public libraries strategy was not published before last year's general election, but I am sure the Minister agrees that that work must not be lost. This is why we are disappointed that the Minister, Baroness Twycross, has so far avoided giving a direct answer to a direct question on this matter, so I ask the Minister here today: when will his Department publish a strategy for English public libraries, as many Members have called for? I know he understands the need for a new strategy that is informed by data, rooted in localism and underpinned by a longer term vision for this essential local provision. That would allow libraries not just to survive but to flourish in the years ahead.

Members on both sides of this House believe in the quiet power of public libraries to educate and inspire, and we stand ready to work across the House to ensure their future is every bit as valuable as their past.

10.39 am

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): It is a delight, as ever, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I will not comment on how well dressed you are today.

It is a great delight to take part in this debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Jonathan Davies) on securing it. He talked a bit about the history of libraries. I absolutely adore a library. I have used the British Library many times, when it was in its old place in the British Museum and in the new building—still new to me, that is; younger people here will not remember its old place. I have used the London Library and libraries in Worcester, Stoke, Manchester, Birmingham, Southwark, Newcastle, Oxford and Cambridge. I have used Lambeth Palace library, as well as libraries in Cardiff, Treorchy and Porth. I absolutely adore using libraries. Many hon. Members mentioned their constituencies, but I agree with the Argentinian writer, Jorge Luis Borges, who said,

“I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire made several points about titles. Being in two Departments, I have many bits in my title. Sometimes people say we should have a tourism Minister, a this Minister or a that Minister. The real question is whether we engage sufficiently with the sector and get the work done. I know that Baroness Twycross, who took over these responsibilities from me relatively recently, is very engaged in this work. I want to give her space to lay out what she will be able to achieve and the work she is engaged in, before we start talking about titles and reassignment.

Responding to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) puts me in a slight difficulty. Quite a few hon. Members referred to things that are extremely devolved. Libraries are fundamentally devolved responsibilities. The hon. Member made extremely good points about

how libraries can help with mental health and health generally and issues such as loneliness, but I am not going to tell people in Northern Ireland how to run the library service. If I did, I would suddenly get an email and a demand for a meeting, so I will be careful.

That also applies to my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane). There is a competition in size of constituencies going on today. I know areas of my hon. Friend's constituency well because I was—arguably—educated partly in Stirling. I note that Bannockburn library is closed today. When libraries are closed or open is a financial issue, which is tough for many local authorities. I was a councillor in Hackney a long time ago and know how difficult it is for local councillors making tough financial decisions, desperate to keep libraries open every day if possible, but struggling to do so.

My hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) referred to Andrew Carnegie, who was an extraordinary donor and investor in libraries. As the MP for a former mining constituency, I am aware that mining communities often had to do for themselves. The miners' unions and trade unions played an important part in ensuring that their members learned how to read. It was not just about being able to read “Alton Locke” by Charles Kingsley, one of the early Christian socialists, or “The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists” and other socialist tomes that were so important to the trade union movement. Libraries were a vital part of enabling the working classes to get on in life, so for Labour MPs, this debate has a particular piquancy.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) wants to reopen the library alongside the creative campus in Folkestone. When I visited on a day that was gorgeous sunny, though slightly windy, I was impressed by Tracey Emin's discarded sock sculpture on the floor and other brilliant artworks around the town. I tried to pick up the sock, of course, because I thought it was litter, which was the whole point. Integration of all creative industries working together with the library service is a potent thing. The library building my hon. Friend referred to is beautiful. Had it been better looked after by Kent County Council in recent years, it would be more readily accessible and better preserved for the future. Like my hon. Friend, I hope very much that the library will reopen.

I am not sure about the statistic, mentioned by the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, that there are more busts of Rabbie Burns than of anybody else. I am very happy if there are, but I suspect that there are more of Gladstone—there may even be more of Winston Churchill. None the less, he made the point about Carnegie. Of course, philanthropy is an important reason why we ended up with so many libraries around the UK. I want philanthropy to play an increasing part in the future. That is not because I want local authorities to walk away from their responsibilities, but simply because I applaud those philanthropists who gave away every single penny of the vast wealth that they made in their lifetimes. The more we can do to enable that, the better—not only for our libraries, but for our creative sector, museums and galleries, many of which, especially those associated with local authorities, are struggling in exactly the same way.

[Chris Bryant]

My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) is a former councillor who has experienced some of the difficulties of trying to keep local authority libraries going. Incidentally, those difficulties affect not just local authority libraries, but libraries in universities and in so many other public institutions. They have struggled to survive. Some of them are independent libraries. He made a good point about how important it is to diversify, and mentioned that one library in his patch has a gym. A few weeks ago, I was in Ogmere Vale, in my patch, where the library, gym and community function are all part of the same service; they are very much thought of in an integrated way. That is the pattern adopted by lots of local authorities, which sometimes still run the libraries in house, and sometimes decide to hand them over to a third party to allow for further financial investment.

The hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) referred to the specialised advice that libraries may provide. Advice to businesses has not particularly featured in our debate, but it is an important part of what the British Library and many local libraries often provide. If someone wants to set up a business in a local area, they will need to understand that local area, and one of the most important facilities for that is the local library, which will have statistical advice. The library will want to help them in whatever way it can—with planning law or whatever it may be. Losing that aspect of what libraries provide would be bad for economic growth—our ability to grow not just in some parts of the UK but everywhere.

From the day I started as MP for the Rhondda in 2001, one of my strategies was to look at how many local businesses I had. People often think that the way to get more local jobs is to get one big business that will employ 1,000 or 2,000 people. Actually, in most constituencies, it is more effective to enable lots of small businesses to grow—to go from employing two people to employing five or 10 people. There are few areas where we can do that without libraries having a role to play.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) rightly referred to VE Day celebrations, in which libraries up and down the country played an important part, because of their important role in enabling and helping the community. Our libraries are sometimes associated with an archive facility, which has a particular value. British people, like people all around the world, love to explore their genealogy, so it is really important to make those archive facilities available to people. In a library, someone can investigate what their grandad or auntie did in the war, or where they lived, for free—something that they otherwise might have to pay for. I note that Hexham library has “Rhymetime” tomorrow morning at 10 am; on Saturday at 4 o’clock in the afternoon, it has “Ukrainian Stories”, which I think is a book launch.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) admitted to reading Nancy Drew mysteries, which I think were marketed primarily at girls. I read several, but I had a cover to hide the fact that it was Nancy Drew. Modern books for young adults and kids are very different and not specifically targeted at boys and girls. There has been a complete transformation in that market, and hurrah for that. I think it was Alexander Pope who said:

“A little learning is a dangerous thing;

Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring”.

This is one of the great things about libraries. Not only do they enable us to take our first step into reading, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East said, they enable us to move on from Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys to Dickens, Shakespeare and many others. I am sure that none of us—I think we can say this of every single Member—would have arrived here if we had never used a library, and none of us would have ended up as a Member of Parliament.

My hon. Friend was right, as others were, to pay tribute to the House of Commons Library. It has a slightly different role because it provides so much advice for us to inform our contributions to debates. It also has an awful lot of books, including some of mine.

My hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) referred to the Data (Use and Access) Bill debate later, so I will leave the bit about copyright and AI for this afternoon’s debate when I will appear in a different capacity. She is absolutely right about volunteers. So many libraries either rely entirely, as community libraries, on volunteers to run them and keep them open, or have volunteers as part of a team. I pay tribute to all the people who have managed to keep libraries open. My father, who is no longer with us, lived in Alderney in his latter years. He and his wife loved spending a day as volunteers at the library. I think he quite liked the business of issuing fines—one of his favourite moments was when he found out that his next-door neighbour had not returned his book for 17 years or whatever. My hon. Friend is also right that libraries are a vital part of the social infrastructure.

The hon. Member for North Devon (Ian Roome) was also a councillor. I think councillors have a particular interest, as I have mentioned, and insights to bring to this debate. He referred to Braunton library and the 300 community events. That is mirrored in every single library up and down the land. No library is characterised by Ali MacGraw stuffiness. It is a place entirely open to the public. People have referred to the role of libraries during covid. They have also referred to them as non-judgmental spaces where people can simply just be, including in the winter. Sometimes it is a place to feel warmth, which is really important. One of my favourite moments in a library was a few years ago when I persuaded the British Museum to lend one of its articulated Japanese dragons to my library in Treorchy. I do not know whether we Welsh are just obsessed with dragons, but I remember seeing kids looking at that Japanese dragon and they were absolutely fascinated and loved it. That sense of enticing people into being curious is another aspect of why libraries can be so important.

The hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French) referred warmly to his experience in his constituency. I am going to bridle slightly because he referred to our Budget decisions. If we refer to the 14 years of Budget decisions that caused the difficulties facing the library service across the whole United Kingdom, we could be here a lot longer. The truth is that many local authorities have had a really tough time with their budgets cut year after year, and one of my anxieties was always that. One of the dangers for national Government is saying, “Right, we are going to tell local authorities to do more while giving them less money, because

we—national Government—will not then have to make the cuts; somebody else has to.” That is a thing that happened to the library service over all those years.

I hate all the gloom about libraries. I hate it when people keep banging on about how all the libraries have closed and all the rest of it. The truth is that, as people have referred to, roughly a third of people in the UK have used a library at least once. I do not think that is an annual pilgrimage. Many of them will have used it repeatedly and there are people who go to the library every single day of the week, or every week.

Libraries are all about promoting and enabling reading. Sometimes we forget that role—if I could get every child in the country to read one extra book a year, would that not be a success in the end for them individually and for the economy? We have not referred to the publishing business in the UK, which is an important part of our creative industries. We export more books than any other country in the world, and I want to keep it like that.

We have referred to libraries as community spaces. I have also referred to their archive responsibilities and how important those are for many people. Libraries are constantly evolving: 47 libraries in Norfolk provide a service to weigh babies and, as I understand it, in Devon they provide 3D printers. I and many other Members have referred to libraries that are doing innovative and fascinating new things all the time.

Last year, upper-tier local authorities spent £694 million on libraries in England.

Mr French: Will the Minister give way briefly?

Chris Bryant: Oh, all right.

Mr French: One of the key asks from this debate from Members across the House is that the Government publish a national strategy on the back of the Sanderson review. Can I push the Minister to commit to that today?

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman is such an impatient man—it is not as if his party did not have 14 years to produce a national strategy, or anything like that. One of the asks was about titles, and one of the others was about whether there should be a national strategy. As I said earlier, I am keen to allow Baroness Twycross, who has only recently taken on responsibilities in that area, to go where she wants to on this.

One of the difficulties with a national strategy is that so much is devolved. Of course, we try to foster good relations with our Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland counterparts, and there is a regular get-together with the devolved Administrations to promote that, but a lot of these decisions are made by local authorities and in other Departments. When local authorities and Departments get only an annual settlement, rather than

a three-year settlement, it makes it much more difficult for them to make coherent, long-term decisions. I hope that we will change that in the spending review—that is one of the things I hope will help with funding. However, I have no idea what budget allocations there will be for independent Departments. So I am somewhat resisting the idea of a national strategy. At the moment, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport is already producing three or four national strategies on different subjects, so I am hesitant to advance down that route.

The Sanderson report made key recommendations, many of them not for Government at all, but for the sector. We are keen to see those play out and be adopted wherever possible. We are working with the sector and with Arts Council England, which has a specific responsibility in relation to libraries in England.

Several hon. Members have referred to the amount of money—£5.5 million—that we have set aside this year for improving libraries. We also have a superintending role. The 1964 legislation was deliberately drafted in a rather ambiguous way, which is one of the issues we always face. In '24-25 we engaged with 53 local authorities in a superintending role, and we have engaged with seven since April this year.

As Members have said, 276 libraries closed between 2010 and 2023. We do want to make that closure process stop because we believe passionately in libraries.

10.58 am

Jonathan Davies: I thank colleagues from across the House for contributing to this important debate. We have heard stories of how libraries have transformed individuals' lives. I was particularly moved by what my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes), and many other colleagues across the House, said. We have learned a lot, but we have also had some lighter moments about the role that libraries play.

I know that ministerial responsibilities have changed and that there is no mechanism to get Baroness Twycross to come here, but I would be grateful if the Minister made sure that she has heard what has been said in this debate.

We have not had a commitment to a national strategy today. A lot of good work is coming through, but there are aspects of the Sanderson review that are valuable, and I believe that many of those aspects could be implemented very cheaply or at almost no cost. That might be something that the sector could do itself, but with the help of the convening power of the Government.

I would be grateful if the messages we have heard from across the House get to Baroness Twycross and if, a little bit further down the line, when the Department has had more time to chew this over and she has had time to embed herself in her role, we revisited the subject to see what progress has been made.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Rebalancing Regional Economies

11 am

Peter Dowd (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. If you do not have that permission, do not try to speak. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up. I also remind Members that the debate is only half an hour; if the Member in charge does take interventions, bear in mind that the Minister also has to respond.

11.1 am

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of rebalancing regional economies.

It is a true pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. This Government have rightly prioritised growth, devolution and the need for growth to be seen in all regions and nations. Last year's Budget and this year's spring statement freed up £113 billion of infrastructure investment. Huge amounts of work are being done to develop industrial strategies that will drive forward key sectors. We have new trade deals, and have seen the corporate world commit record levels of investment in renewable energy, artificial intelligence and many more sectors.

Brilliant stuff—but what does it actually mean to the people of Rossendale and Darwen, Blackpool, Winsford, Macclesfield, or Cornwall? Clearly not much yet, given the kicking we got in the local elections. These small towns and coastal communities are the places where productivity is lowest.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): My constituency is both rural and coastal, which presents a unique set of challenges in terms of deprivation and neglect. Urban areas often receive targeted investment, but rural and coastal communities can be overlooked. Does the hon. Member agree that the Government must adopt a tailored approach, taking into account the rural premium in the index of multiple deprivation, to specifically address the distinct needs of such areas and unlock their significant economic potential?

Andy MacNae: I agree with the hon. Member; her point is largely the thrust of my speech, so hopefully I will align with her thinking.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for securing this debate. He is absolutely right about regional rebalancing of the economies. From a Northern Irish perspective, I can encourage him that Invest Northern Ireland has decided to relocate many of its upcoming businesses outside the Belfast metropolitan area, as a way of moving forward, but does he agree that location can never overtake viability in the economy?

Andy MacNae: Absolutely. That is the essence of growth for all. It is about going beyond location and beyond geography as a determinant, and getting the right outcomes for everyone. Our small towns and coastal communities are where productivity is lowest, and where the cost of living and housing crises have hit

hardest. They have been left out and let down for so long that it is no wonder trust and expectation are so low—but those are the places where the next election will be won or lost, and where this Government must deliver for our communities if we are to live up to our promises.

To mean something to Rossendale and Darwen, and to places like it, growth must translate into real and tangible change in every neighbourhood. It must mean good jobs and accessible opportunities for young people where they live. It must mean that our towns feel clean and safe, and that people have the houses they need. It must mean that our small and medium-sized businesses thrive and put more money in people's pockets. It must mean that our roads, buses and rail systems actually connect to where people need to go.

I think we all get that—I certainly know the Minister does—but what worries me is that, when it comes to actual decision making, too often the investment planning defaults to big cities and existing growth areas, with the role of small towns seemingly reduced to just feeding people into the great city machine. Indeed, it can often be a presumption that the answer for small towns is nothing more than better transport into a city. Such thinking totally misses the point.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab) *rose*—

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab) *rose*—

Andy MacNae: I will give way to my hon. Friends sequentially.

Alex Ballinger: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he welcome the news announced today that 12,000 civil servants will move out of London and into the regions to work on exactly these issues? Would he recommend that some of the civil servants moving to the west midlands should come from the Department for Business and Trade, so they can focus on the automotive sectors, the defence sectors and the advanced manufacturing that really make our region great?

Andy MacNae: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. Indeed, that movement out into the regions is vital; a thrust throughout this debate is the understanding of regional and local realities. That movement can only be welcomed, and it should be as broad as it possibly can be.

Chris McDonald: I was very exercised by my hon. Friend's point about "feeding people" from small towns into cities—a very patronising view espoused by ill-informed lobby groups such as the Centre for Cities. Does he agree that that view denies the reality: that people who live in towns want their towns to be successful and have real pride in their towns, including places such as Stockton, Billingham and Norton in my constituency? That success is good for the country, good for those towns and good for the people who live in them.

Andy MacNae: I agree 100% with my hon. Friend. It is the pride that we have in our towns that really matters. Good things should happen in our towns, not just in some distant city that only a tiny proportion of people in a town might be lucky enough to be able to travel to. That includes pride in our neighbourhoods; neighbourhoods are important to their residents.

Having said that, I do not deny for a moment that cities are our economic engines and that we desperately need to address the productivity gap between our regional centres and London—but, as we have said, this process cannot just be about the cities and the big towns. It matters little to the people of Bacup how well Manchester is doing. Instead, we need to see the good things happening in Manchester mirrored in places such as Bacup. That is the true test of whether we are delivering for all.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. Greater Manchester has the fastest growing economy in the UK, with the most diverse range of sector strengths in the country, but despite that, Greater Manchester's productivity is still 35% below London's. Does he agree that we cannot rebalance our regional economies without major investments, such as the Northern Arc, which could double the size of the region's economy in 30 years?

Andy MacNae: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. That is largely the point: we must rebalance our economies by bridging the productivity gap between our cities, including our northern cities, and the rest of the country. At the same time, though, we must make sure that that growth in cities such as Manchester, which in many ways is doing great, is felt in Lancashire and other places at the same time.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. My point is similar to that of the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour). We often discuss the rebalancing of regional economies in terms of urban versus rural or north versus south, but does my hon. Friend agree that we must consider more nuanced geographical and socioeconomic factors, including those of communities in remote coastal areas such as Cornwall, whose characteristics differ substantially from inland rural communities on issues such as non-resident population, the cost of beach safety, the ability to attract construction workers and, of course, a massive challenge with housing costs?

Andy MacNae: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. Indeed, the requirement for bespoke interventions is the thrust of the latter parts of my speech.

Whether places such as Bacup feel the benefit of Government interventions is a test for whether we are delivering growth for all. The last Government failed spectacularly in this challenge and, if we are to avoid the same fate, we must do things differently.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): It is now nearly 13 years since the Institute for Public Policy Research North published its landmark report, "Northern Prosperity is National Prosperity", which set out in black and white the evidence that investing in the regions—all regions across the UK—is one of the best ways to achieve growth nationally. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is long past time that we devolved power and funding in order to create jobs in all our communities across the UK?

Andy MacNae: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention—I remember that brilliant report very well, and that process of devolution is a crucial element of getting this right.

What are the underlying issues and what can we do about them? It is perfectly understandable that, in looking for growth, we go first to places where it can be achieved most easily at scale and at the lowest cost. That is an instinct backed-up by long-established practices. We see it manifest in announcements around the Oxford-Cambridge corridor, the lower Thames crossing, Heathrow and Old Trafford.

Will Stone (Swindon North) (Lab): While I welcome the Oxford-Cambridge corridor, does my hon. Friend agree that extending it down to places such as Swindon would not only boost the economy in my region, but also the country?

Andy MacNae: Indeed; part of the thrust of my argument is that these growth corridors must extend into the areas that need them most, and I am sure that Swindon very much needs to be part of that mix. The focus on those easier areas is perfectly reasonable, but if we continue in this vein of only doing the big and easy things, all the money will be gone before we get anywhere near the likes of Rossendale and Darwen.

In places such as my home, delivering growth is not easy—it is complex and bespoke and needs sustained focus. There is rarely a silver bullet and, if there was one, it would be tough to deliver. But, if properly valued, the long-term benefits of doing the hard yards are huge not just in economic terms, but in terms of health, crime, housing, environment and general wellbeing. That is the rub: as things stand, too often we do not fully value these benefits, either quantitatively or qualitatively. Ministers make decisions and advisers advise. The Government guidance for investment is the Green Book, which sets out how decisions on major investment projects are appraised. It was last reviewed in 2020 and is subject to another review now. Despite a clear intent for that guidance to support regional rebalancing, it is clear that embedded practices too often default to over-reliance on simplistic and short-term cost-benefit ratios.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): We have had debates on the Green Book in Westminster Hall before, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman agrees with me that there is a real opportunity, in the Treasury's review of its methodology, to drive growth in our regions and in constituencies such as mine. We should be valuing things such as investing in the tram-train between Manchester Piccadilly and Marple in a way that generates growth. Does he agree that that is an opportunity that the Government should seize?

Andy MacNae: I agree 100% with the hon. Lady. It is a huge opportunity, and I will come to the specifics around it very shortly.

Some Departments still require projects to surpass a certain benefit-cost threshold before the investment decision gets anywhere near a Minister's desk. It is a statement of fact to say that that reliance on benefit-cost ratios favours better-off areas and quick wins, contributing to regional and sub-regional imbalance over many years. That issue does not stop with the Green Book—it is broader than that; I would argue that it can be summed up as the simple human temptation to take the quicker and easier option.

[*Andy MacNae*]

The problem has historically been compounded by a failure to join up investment thinking across Departments and geographical footprints—for instance, local regeneration funding not being linked to regional transport or housing strategy. The great failure of the last Government's levelling-up programme was to abandon any sort of strategic approach and simply rely on bidding competitions and piecemeal sticking-plaster interventions determined by the likelihood of a good headline.

If we are really to see the benefits of growth in places such as Rossendale and Darwen, we need to address all that head-on. The Green Book and appraisal practice must change to properly value all impacts of investment in our small towns. We must ensure that all appraisal processes, including departmental models, follow the intent of that guidance. Green Book best practice must be updated to ensure that project funding is primarily based on strategic objectives, which may include aspects that cannot be valued quantitatively, rather than arbitrary forecasts. That must include ending all arbitrary benefit-cost ratio thresholds based on limited economic forecasting, replacing them with strengthened and broadened place-based systems of evaluation, with public transparency about the calculations.

Appraisals must recognise the long-term and interlinked nature of key interventions extending over the period by which the benefits are valued, and address the excessive discounting of long-term impacts. More fundamentally, our strategies must insist on doing the hard yards, while giving the fiscal flexibility, regulatory framework and sustained leadership to deliver effectively.

The question “What does this do for our most deprived and left-behind neighbourhoods?” should be embedded in every investment strategy and decision process. We should develop tests that seek to answer that question and by which we can judge investments. By insisting on truly holistic, place-based approaches designed to benefit all, we can deliver much more meaningful impact. In delivering that sort of approach, devolution and local leadership could and should play a vital role—but only if we do it right.

It has been well argued that to close national productivity gaps we need to focus investment through integrated settlements towards the cities and devolved authorities. With developed institutions and the greatest ability to get things done, I agree with that, but that is the relatively easy bit. We must also do the hard bit: such progress must be in parallel with targeted investment in deprived towns outside the immediate economic envelope of the city, in line with original strategy and founded on the principle of growth for all that cuts across devolved areas. That strategy must be supported by flexible funding and delivery capacity to respond to specific challenges and opportunities.

We cannot continue to justify Government investment flowing into the likes of Manchester while the towns of Lancashire do not even appear in the picture. As a practical example, take the TransPennine route upgrade—a major project that will transform connectivity between cities and major towns across the Pennines. It has been presented, in some quarters, as a transformational project for our region. However, if I ask, “What does this do for Rossendale and Darwen, or any small town on or near the route?”, the answer is, “Frankly, not much—all it does is take trains past us a bit quicker.”

Would we not rather think about the rail upgrade as one part of a wider project that enables a growth corridor, and in which we make a positive impact on small towns and rural areas in that corridor a fundamental requirement of the investment, for instance by insisting on local procurement, associated recruitment and skills programmes, investment and startup incentives, brownfield remediation, housing renewal, local transport improvements, public realm investment and so on?

Such an approach could be delivered through a partnership of Liverpool, Manchester, Lancashire and West Yorkshire authorities, with mayors sharing accountability. It would require a fully place-based appraisal mechanism, flexible funding and long-term delivery capability. It should also be expected to bring in other agencies such as Homes England, Active Travel England and Historic England to provide additional leverage. By insisting on such an holistic approach, we could get something far more impactful, and bigger than the sum of its parts.

We have tried all this before with regional development agencies, housing market renewal, the single regeneration budget, the new deal for communities programme, local enterprise growth initiatives, local enterprise partnerships and so on. Many of these things were great, but they never quite got there. Too often programmes would retreat into doing the same easy thing over and over again, lose strategic focus and just deliver a lot of nice-to-haves or be pulled back into spending orthodoxies by risk-averse oversight. As Gordon Brown reflected—I will not do a Scottish accent:

“The frustration is that we haven't made enough progress. Given the deindustrialisation of Britain, we haven't managed to find a way to generate the kind of growth and wealth in the areas of the country that were at the heart of the first Industrial Revolution.”

This Government, who were elected by those very areas, must again take up that challenge.

For too long, geography has meant destiny. Small towns such as Bacup, Whitworth, Rawtenstall and Darwen have been at the back of the queue and left behind, as others shout louder and seemingly offer easier solutions. Our decision-making process has compounded that and left our communities behind. We must change the game. Our new default must be to put our left-behind neighbourhoods first. We must learn the lessons of the past and not allow established orthodoxies and a desire for easy wins to stand in the way. In the end, we simply cannot afford to fail those communities that need us most.

11.17 am

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 Dowd. It was a pleasure to hear the outstanding contribution by my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae). I am grateful to him for securing the debate, and I am grateful to my colleagues who have come and found a way to contribute to it as well. This is a very important debate. The frustration over the imbalances both between and within regions is felt locally, whether it is in Teesside or Cornwall or anywhere in between, so it is right that colleagues are interested in this.

I have a whole argument to set out, but instinctively I will start with something I have said for a number of years, both when I shadowed this brief in opposition and throughout my time in government—something,

most importantly, that the Prime Minister has said on multiple occasions: we see the fundamental transfer of power and resources from this place to local communities as a huge priority for this Government. We do that because we believe it is right that people should have a stronger say over their future, be it their economic future, their social future or the future of the fabric of their community, but we also strongly believe that that is what delivers.

It is right that the No. 1 mission for this Government is growth, but if we are to get that, the heart of our growth mission must be making sure that everybody has good opportunities, and that prosperity is spread across the UK. This is hard to say, especially as a Minister, but also from Westminster itself: it is an inside job. When I became the Minister for local growth, a job I loved doing, I did not walk through a sheep dip that gave me omniscience over Lancashire, Teesside, the west Midlands or Halesowen. The experts are my hon. Friends, but more importantly they are their constituents. My role—and our job as a Government—is to get those resources and powers out to them, so that they can change their communities and shape their economic futures. That is an important and huge goal.

It is very hard not to get into a conversation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) says, about either north or south, urban or rural and city or town, and that is a feature of this debate. But certainly when it comes to growth across those areas outside London and the south-east that have had the hardest time over the past few decades, I do not see these things as either/or's. I think they interlock.

Afzal Khan: This is an important debate. In Manchester, a shocking 11 children in a class of 30 are living in poverty, which we know impacts their development, experiences, education and mental health. We must ensure that the economy works for the people we serve, so does the Minister agree that tackling child poverty must be central to our plans for regional rebalancing, especially in areas such as Manchester Rusholme?

Alex Norris: I agree that child poverty is particularly cruel. It is cruel because of the hardship that those children grow up in, but it is also cruel because their potential is snuffed out before they have even had a chance, and we should want everybody to have a chance to play their role in their community. That speaks to the very important point that even within communities that are thriving, there are still some of those neighbourhoods. This is a conversation about towns, but it is also a conversation about neighbourhoods. The very poorest neighbourhoods exist in all parts of the country, and we should have a real neighbourhoods focus for how we tackle that.

As I said, I think that these things interlock. I make no apology for believing that there is an importance in ensuring that our cities thrive. If our largest 11 underperforming cities got to the national average, that would be worth £20.5 billion; to the Exchequer, it would be £63 billion of additional output. That is a huge prize. I am thinking about Belfast and the incredible success story that is going on there in banking and finance, in the creative industries and in tech generally. These are incredible opportunities, which have the potential to change that community and change lives.

However, it is right that colleagues here, such as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), should ask, “But what does that mean for Newtownards? What does that mean for Coleraine? What does that mean for Ballymena?” Those conversations are very much in the spirit that my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen led us off in. We will as a Government—this has been part of the debate already today—look to back those projects that have a potentially transformative impact. Whether that involves the Oxford, Milton Keynes and Cambridge corridor or unlocking the growth potential of our cities, we are going to do those things. We think that that should be at the core of our industrial strategy. I am talking about backing places with potential for growth, and growth with a degree of speed as well. There is the clustering that is going on. I am thinking about Liverpool and Manchester and some of the technology clustering. We are going to back those things. We think that is the right thing to do. But I want to give colleagues a real assurance that our approach has a lot more than that, too. As I have said, it is about power and it is about resources.

With regard to the power piece, I am very proud of our devolution agenda. As a Government, we have built on what the previous Government did. They did good things in establishing the mayoralities that they did. We want that to go wider and deeper, which I will talk about in a second. In recent months, I have been working very closely with our mayors on the development of local growth plans, so that—again, in the spirit of what my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen says—rather than Ministers sitting in Whitehall with a map and working out where they think there might be some potential, we are saying to the leaders of those communities, “Get together with your community. Tell us where your economic future is. Tell us what the hurdles are to realising that economic future. Tell us what resources you need to deliver that economic future. We will agree those plans with you and we will back you. We will give you the power to do that. You can use tools, such as investment zones or freeports, but we want you to say what it takes.”

I am very pleased to say that as we get to the spending review this year, we will see those plans come out. Whether we are talking about the Liverpool city region, the east midlands—my area—the Greater Manchester combined authority, the west midlands or elsewhere, people will see emerging very exciting plans that will be about a new vision, a new understanding of where this country's potential and opportunities are, because suddenly they will be popping up all over the country. I am really excited about that, but we need more people to be part of the settlement.

The devolution steps taken by previous Governments were good ones, but it could go much further, so we have made a commitment to a deeper devolution settlement—more powers across housing, planning, transport, energy, skills, employment support and more, so that locally those tools are there to shape place and to shape the economic future. I am delighted to say that Lancashire is soon to be part of this. We want more people to be in on that settlement because we think it delivers for their communities, so it is great that the Lancashire combined county authority is up and running. Of course, there are six areas in the devolution priority programme. That means that when those priorities are

[Alex Norris]

delivered and over the line, in addition to the devolution we have already, the proportion of England covered by devolution will rise to 77%, or just over 44 million people, by next May.

Perran Moon: Will the Minister give way?

Alex Norris: I will shortly. That will cover the entirety of the north, which may well be the point that my hon. Friend wants to make.

Perran Moon: I wholeheartedly agree with the principle of devolving powers out of this place and into regions, but does the Minister agree that in certain parts of the country, namely Cornwall, it will be very difficult for the model that is designed within the English devolution Bill to apply? Does he agree that we need flexibility and a nuanced approach to those areas that are desperate for devolution but will not and cannot sign up to the model that is currently Government strategy?

Alex Norris: I recognise that Cornwall is different. That point is obviously established in multinational architecture as well. There is no doubt that there are differences in Cornwall. I know that my hon. Friend and his Cornish colleagues are making that case very strongly to my hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and English Devolution, and I am hearing that case as well. We know that that will continue. We need to have a programme that fits, and my hon. Friend will understand our need for coherence, too, but I appreciate the spirit in which he makes his point. I know there are differences in Cornwall, and those conversations will continue.

Luke Myer: Do the Government accept the subsidiarity principle wherein powers should not just sit at the mayoral level, but should be as close to the community as possible? That would empower our local authorities and communities themselves, rather than just creating structures that sit above communities and are distant from them.

Alex Norris: My hon. Friend, with characteristic vigour, takes me to the next part of my argument. I do not see the finished devolution product being a shift of power from Whitehall and Westminster to a regional or sub-regional body that is far away from communities and the local authority. I think that transfer is an unalloyed good, but I do not think it is the whole job.

That is why I was so pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen was the one who opened the debate. Our plan for neighbourhoods is a step in that direction—we are saying that we want money and power to be held at a neighbourhood level, to shape place. We think that is the second part of devolution. The first part probably gets the most public attention—creating new mayors and new structures creates a lot of interest. For me, the magic is in that next stage, which is where communities really take control for themselves—and of their future.

That is not just rhetoric from me; we have put our money where our mouths are. The £1.5 billion we have committed to the plan for neighbourhoods will deliver up to £20 million of funding and support for 75 areas over the next decade. It is hopefully a starting point. In April I had the pleasure of visiting two of the areas, Darwen and Rawtenstall, which are in my hon. Friend's constituency. I was struck by the energy—my hon. Friend always has that characteristic energy, of course, but his former colleagues in local government had it too, as well as the neighbourhood board and all the folks who had come to play their role in that process. I was struck by how ambitious they were for their communities, and the plans they had. As I go around the UK talking to people, mentioning local growth and the plan for neighbourhoods, it is striking how they want to use the money to catalyse further investments in their communities.

Andy MacNae: This is all wonderful stuff, and obviously we are massively behind these plans, but does the Minister agree that in order to make the most of the plan for neighbourhoods, we must address the infrastructure constraints within the sub-regions—constraints that have traditionally held back our areas? In the case of Rawtenstall and many areas, it is the rail links. There is also the transport grid. There are so many aspects of this. We will only get the value for money out of our plan for neighbourhoods if we address the infrastructure around our areas, too.

Alex Norris: I agree with that. When I visited my hon. Friend's constituency, I was struck by the fact that he is in a valley, and if anything is wrong with that road, everything is wrong with that road and everything grinds to a halt. Of course the plan cannot be seen in isolation.

I have only one minute left, and I want to cover the Green Book before I conclude. My hon. Friend made a very good case for updating the Green Book. As he said, a review is under way. That will ensure that the Green Book provides objective, transparent advice on public investment across the country, including outside of London and the south-east, meaning that investment in all regions gets a proper hearing and areas get proper backing for growth. I encourage colleagues to continue to talk to the Treasury, as I know they are doing, about what they want to see from a future Green Book to ensure that they are getting the investment they need in their communities.

There has been a lot of energy in this room; there is always a lot of energy in the room when we talk about local devolution and local leadership. We have huge untapped potential in this country, and what it takes to tap into that potential, and that desire for communities to take control of their future, is a Government who support the transfer of money and power from this place to them to allow them to shape place. I am really excited to be getting on with that job, and to be working with colleagues in doing so.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Glass Packaging: Extended Producer Responsibility

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of extended producer responsibility for packaging on glass packaging producers.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. In the UK, the glass manufacturing sector supports more than 120,000 jobs, adding £2.2 billion to the economy each year. I am immensely proud to have Beatson Clark in my constituency, which has been manufacturing glass in Rotherham for more than 270 years. It is a key local employer, and the only remaining independent UK-owned glass container manufacturer. It is also the only company in the UK that still produces amber pharmaceutical glass. After adding in the supply chain, more than 2,000 people are dependent on Beatson Clark for their livelihood.

As we move to a fully circular economy, glass is the perfect packaging material. It is infinitely recyclable, does not lose quality over time and does not release harmful microplastics into products, including the human body or the environment at large. It is easily and widely recyclable, with no degradation as part of the recycling process. Bottle banks were first introduced in the UK in the 1970s. Glass that was collected then is most likely still in circulation today.

Glass manufacture is energy-intensive, but with electric and hybrid furnaces and readily available technology there is no reason why glass cannot be a net zero product in the not too distant future, especially with Government support with infrastructure and electricity costs, as per the Climate Change Committee's recommendations. Yet, because of the Government's dogged decision to press ahead with extended producer responsibility, initiated by the previous Administration, we instead face the decimation of our domestic glass industry.

Job losses and the closure of sites are literally just around the corner. That is not the industry overreacting. British Glass has already received warnings from more than one beer and cider manufacturer that there is no future for glass in this country due to the EPR policy. EPR follows hot on the heels of a challenging few years for UK glass manufacturing. The energy crisis, increased costs and a reduction in trade tariffs from 6% to 0% since leaving the EU have made cheaper imported glass so much more attractive.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): Holden's Bottling company in my constituency has written to me with concerns about EPR, saying it makes the company simply uncompetitive. Does my hon. Friend agree that if EPR fees were calculated on volume not weight, it would incentivise using more sustainable materials such as glass over plastic?

Sarah Champion: I support my hon. Friend 100%. It is crazy that we are not doing that by volume, because glass is heavier. We are forcing people to move to lighter products, particularly plastic.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Would my hon. Friend also accept that because glass is heavier than other products, it costs more to recycle and transport? It may break during transport, so it is not the case that it is a more sustainable product.

Sarah Champion: I have not heard that or seen any evidence of that. All I can say is that in Wales, 95% of the glass is kerbside-collected and recycled. I do not know where my hon. Friend's stats come from. If she would like to share them with me and the industry, I would like to have a look.

Glass produced in Turkey is not currently covered by emissions trading, so the CO₂ emitted is not captured by matching penalties. In addition, Turkish glass manufacturers have built factories in organised industrial zones and benefit from Government support in the form of lower water, natural gas or telecommunications costs, as well as a lower taxation scheme.

The lower cost base, supported by the Turkish Government in the form of state aid, is assisting Turkey in targeting export prices at rates that are lower than UK factory costs. However, it is the baseline fees set for glass under the extended producer responsibility that are set to be the hammer-blow. And the hammer administering that blow is being wielded by a Labour Government, which I find hugely disappointing.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): I want to put on the record my pride in having a glassworks in Irvine in my constituency and in its many workers, including Mr Thomson, who lived next door to me in Auchenhavie Place when I was growing up. The Government must consider the concerns of the sector about the EPR and look at the evidence that has been supplied. And I urge the Minister to adopt the sensible solutions that my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) is suggesting today.

Sarah Champion: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention.

The glass sector has always supported the principle behind EPR. It lobbied, on sound environmental and safety grounds, against inclusion in the deposit return scheme, knowing and accepting that that would mean the inclusion of all glass products in EPR. Yet the terms of EPR have seemingly been deliberately stacked against the sector.

It is not only glass manufacturers who will be hit hard by this change. Indeed, since being granted this debate I have been inundated with messages from organisations worried about the impact of EPR.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important to ensure that the implementation of EPR avoids unintended consequences for businesses such as pubs, which are already facing huge headwinds? In many cases, pubs already manage their packaging waste through commercial contracts, so they would face double the levy.

Sarah Champion: My hon. Friend makes a sound point, which I will reinforce.

Let me go through some—I emphasise “some”—of the organisations that have been in touch with me about this issue. They include Vinarchy, one of the world's largest

[Sarah Champion]

wine companies; the Society of Independent Brewers and Associates; the Campaign for Real Ale, CAMRA; the British Beer and Pub Association; the Wine and Spirit Trade Association; UK Hospitality; the Foodservice Packaging Association; the Metal Packaging Manufacturers Association; the Scotch Whisky Association; the Irish Whiskey Association; the English Whisky Guild; the Brewing, Food and Beverage Industry Suppliers' Association; the National Association of Cider Makers; and WineGB. All these organisations have spoken out against EPR and their criticisms of the approach being taken by the Government have been surprisingly—indeed, strikingly—similar. Minister, they cannot all be wrong.

Other assessments of EPR plans have been similarly damning. The Office for Budget Responsibility has concluded that EPR is a tax. It will not improve recycling rates and it will damage businesses. The Bank of England and the British Retail Consortium have recently stated that the impact of this policy on businesses will be similar to that of the increased national insurance costs. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Noah Law) said, all this is coming at a time of rising economic uncertainty, which is the result of the Trump tariffs. Pubs face an estimated £8 million hike in their costs, which will equate to an extra £2,000 per year for a large pub.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this debate. Like her, I have heard from the British Beer and Pub Association, and I have also heard from several of the pubs in my constituency of West Dorset. The British Beer and Pub Association has said that the increase per bottle on beer and cider will be between 5p and 7p. That comes on the back of increases in business rates—one of my local pubs, The George in West Bay, saw their business rates rise from £8,000 a year to £27,000 a year, with increased national insurance contributions on top. If we want to keep village pubs, we need to support them and not keep taxing them.

Sarah Champion: I agree 100%. These consequences—one hopes that they are unintended consequences—are the stark evidence that has been put to the Minister, but seemingly it is not making any difference.

I go back to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay made. EPR is intended to apply to household waste only. As pubs and similar businesses already pay for their packaging waste collection via commercial contracts, they are being charged double.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. She is pointing out the double counting and the effect of EPR. I have 19 pubs and Fuller's brewery in my constituency, and they employ about 4,000 people. With all the other pressures on pubs and the hospitality industry at the moment, this is a bridge too far. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need to reconsider this?

Sarah Champion: I completely agree with my hon. Friend: the Government need to pause, and I will go on to argue why they need to do that.

One of the problems is that packaging producers are unable to exclude these products from their EPR liability. There is no way out for pubs and hospitality businesses other than to pay. The Wine and Spirit Trade Association has said:

"Defra's new rules do not work, and the vast majority of bottles sold in hospitality will pay EPR fees, completely unfairly. Defra are aware of their mistake but have admitted the issue would not be prioritised."

Why? For brewers, the cost of glass beer bottle packaging is estimated to be more than £150 million per year. These additional costs will ultimately be passed on to the consumers. The Government themselves estimate that 85% of EPR costs will fall on the end user. With the public already facing stubbornly high costs of living and inflationary pressure, I cannot comprehend why the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is proceeding with a policy that its own analysis suggests may not meaningfully improve recycling rates. I urge the Minister to change course and step away from this madness.

Let us look in detail at this flawed scheme. The exact methodology for calculating EPR has still not been fully shared, even though it came into effect last month. The process to date has been far from transparent. Based on current illustrative fees, glass is liable for around 30% of EPR costs, while only representing around 5% of in-scope material by volume. That is because fees are calculated by weight, not volume. Glass, as a relatively heavy material, suffers unfairly because of that, yet volume is the limiting factor when collecting and processing waste, not weight.

British Glass has raised several areas that it believes are incorrect in the methodology for calculating the base fees, but it has received no certainty from DEFRA that these will be reflected in the final fees. I am aware that other packaging trade associations have serious concerns about the methodology used to create the base fees. The fee for glass currently stands at £240 per tonne, which equates to around 10p per glass bottle—significantly higher than under similar schemes in Europe.

Germany is often cited, including by DEFRA, as having a good example of a successful EPR scheme. In Germany, the fee stands at £24, or €28, per tonne of glass. I appreciate that collection methods are different in Europe so the comparison is not exact, but are we seriously expected to believe it costs 10 times as much to collect and process glass in the UK as it does in Germany?

The policy makes even less sense when we consider that brands and retailers do not buy packaging by weight, but by unit. That is why it is essential to have an EPR fee that takes into account unit numbers. Recyclable glass can be 20 times heavier than less recyclable packaging, resulting in vastly disproportionate EPR fees on glass.

When I raised these issues previously, the Minister acknowledged that the per-unit impact on glass is higher than for other materials, yet the Government have failed to address that, calling into question their repeated claim that the policy is material-neutral. That is simply not true. Glass is being penalised. The implementation of EPR leaves glass at the mercy of its competitors. Glass beverage containers have been subject to EPR fees since the start of April 2025. Competing materials such as aluminium and plastic will face no policy fees until the introduction of the DRS in, at the earliest, October 2027.

Deirdre Costigan: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Sarah Champion: Not at the moment.

In the meantime, our Government are driving packaging customers decisively and permanently away from glass. If, for example, a brand sells 1 million half-litre bottles, the EPR fees for glass would be £72,000. If, on the other hand, the brand decides to put its product into plastic or aluminium, it will pay no EPR fees whatsoever. Officials and Ministers have argued that materials that are part of a deposit return scheme will be subject to set-up costs, and it is on those grounds that they are granted exemption from EPR fees for close to two and a half years. Yet those set-up costs are still unknown publicly and therefore cannot be, and have not been, considered by brands and retailers when making their packaging choices. The truth is that brands and retailers can avoid the imminent threat of additional costs from EPR by switching away from glass packaging to not pay EPR fees on their beverage products. Once those producers have decided to switch packaging materials, they must invest in new filling technology, and that makes it highly unlikely that they will ever switch back to glass.

This is not a hypothetical problem. The glass industry is already seeing evidence of material-switching to less recyclable packaging. I know that DEFRA has been sent a great deal of evidence of material-switching but, let us be honest, this policy choice does not seem based on evidence but on some unfathomable ideology.

Deirdre Costigan: Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

Sarah Champion: I am sorry, no.

In public, and in response to correspondence, DEFRA stated that there is no, or not enough, evidence of material-switching. That is simply not true. The industry, our businesses, and the sectors affected have supplied that evidence. It makes me wonder whether there is any threshold of evidence that would result in a rethink of the scheme.

DEFRA has highlighted the modulation of future EPR fees to address those expansive concerns, but let us be honest, even at the earliest point that such modulation would be introduced, huge and likely terminal damage will already have been done to glass manufacturers. It is not clear under the current guidelines whether glass will receive a reduction in fees, and it could even receive a fee increase in the future. Fees are currently charged retrospectively so, given the lack of confirmed information on the level of fees that glass will face, the costs are essentially unrecoverable. How can businesses be expected to operate under this profound uncertainty about their current and future costs?

For DEFRA, “reuse” often represents a magic bullet that will address all concerns, if only the industry would get onboard. The glass sector is keen to be part of the development of reuse and glass is the perfect material for it, but we must accept that large-scale national reuse systems are at least a decade away because there is currently no reuse infrastructure. Furthermore, not all products are suitable for reuse. Glass manufacturers can already supply reusable bottles, but a reuse scheme is much more than that. It would require significant buy-in across the whole supply chain.

The Minister also needs to recognise that not all glass bottles are for drinks. Beatson Clark, in my constituency, manufactures medicine bottles. Reuse is a laudable goal and one that the glass industry is keen to collaborate with the Government to achieve, but it is being repeatedly deployed as grounds to ignore the industry’s concerns about EPR. Reuse and EPR are two separate issues, and the conflation seems a deliberate muddying of the debate. The short-term impact of EPR could destroy the UK glass industry long before plans for reuse are even on the drawing board.

DEFRA has stated that the recycling reforms will add at least 21,000 new jobs and £10 billion to the UK economy, and stimulate the growth on which the Government are rightly focused. Yet it is unclear how those new jobs will be created. They are unlikely to be the kind of wealth-generating jobs that we currently have in the glass sector—jobs that are based in our manufacturing heartland, which really needs that work. Even if the Minister’s prediction were true, why risk existing jobs? Why not take the time to get EPR right and have both?

This is not scaremongering. The glass packaging industry is being driven into a crisis directly of the Government’s own making. UK glass manufacturers are already reporting that demand is down by 20%—although the EPR policy has been in place for only a month—and that low-cost imports have increased to help to absorb EPR costs.

On paper, I get that the Government are ostensibly seeking to encourage recycling, while recovering the cost to the public purse of its delivery. That is the right objective, but their approach will achieve the exact opposite. It will encourage switching to less recyclable materials; add costs to businesses such as pubs and breweries already struggling under inflationary and other cost pressures; and increase prices for consumers. If the concerns of industry are not addressed today, the Government also risk destroying our domestic capacity, leaving us reliant on highly polluting foreign imports.

I have raised these issues with the Minister time and again, as have other hon. Members, British Glass and individual businesses. I cannot therefore understand the reticence to engage with these very real problems. The origins of EPR lie with the previous Administration, but by continuing this flawed and ultimately self-defeating approach, a Labour Government risk destroying a great British industry. Does the Minister really want to be responsible for killing off our most recyclable packaging producer?

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): We have approximately 39 minutes before I call the Front-Bench spokespeople, and eight Members who wish to speak, so I will impose a five-minute limit on speeches. Could hon. Members speak to the time, or slightly less? If there are interventions, I will have to reduce that limit.

2.51 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): It is a privilege to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing this debate, and I congratulate her on opening it with such a comprehensive description of the issues that the industry is facing. I will start by declaring an interest, because my husband is the finance director of

[Helen Morgan]

a wine merchant. I assure hon. Members that the impact of EPR on the wine industry has been described to me on many occasions—it is causing such great concern.

North Shropshire has a number of excellent breweries, in addition to wine merchants, including Joule's, Stonehouse and Salopian. In fact, Salopian had one of its excellent products, Shropshire Gold, in Strangers Bar two weeks ago—I hope that everybody had an opportunity to sample it. The pubs that the breweries supply are at the heart of our rural communities, and are fundamental to both village and market town life.

The hospitality and drinks industry are facing a number of headwinds, and the EPR scheme threatens to have a devastating effect on them. We recognise that the principle of applying a levy to those products to encourage producers to reduce the amount of packaging, and unnecessary packaging, is absolutely sound. There are significant concerns with the EPR scheme, however, and it causes a significant issue for the industry.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): This is an important debate. I am lucky to have Robinsons Brewery in my constituency, as well as a number of pubs and the excellent bottling and packaging plant in the Bredbury industrial estate. They have been in touch with me about this issue, because they already pay for commercial waste collection and packaging recovery notes, and the threat of EPR will cost them an additional £500,000. The scheme is not only costly, but complex—does my hon. Friend agree that one of the concerns is unnecessary complexity, and that should be looked at?

Helen Morgan: I totally agree with my hon. Friend: the continuation of the PRN scheme alongside the EPR scheme is one consideration.

We need to protect local and high street businesses. The lack of clear information about what the levy will be is really problematic. Since September 2024, the price has been estimated at between £110 and £330 per tonne—a huge variation. Businesses cannot plan their cash flow and how much they need to accrue without at least some certainty about the levy that will be introduced on a scheme that is already in place. I urge the Minister to nail down that final amount as quickly as possible, so that there is certainty for managing this difficult situation.

There is an enormous amount of bureaucracy involved in calculating the amount of packaging. For example, an importer of wine bottles sells bottles to the on-trade and the off-trade. Although the importer can make good assumptions about the off-trade, where people buy bottles for personal consumption, they have no idea what happens when bottles go to the on-trade—they have lost control, so how do they realistically accrue?

Some of DEFRA's assumptions are not helpful, such as that a bottle of wine or beer bought from a pub will end up being recycled by the council just because it cannot be proven that the person who bought it did not take it home with them. That seems insane. Most pubs are paying huge amounts of money to get their waste recycled privately and they are not costing the council anything, but the producer—the importer of the product—is now having to charge them. They will be paying twice, which is not sustainable for most local pubs.

Small pubs will have to pay about £350 or more a year, a medium-sized pub will have to pay around £750 and larger ones will have to pay £2,000, on top of their excessive business rates. It is important to remember that pubs cannot absorb that, because of their tiny margins, so 85% of those costs are likely to be passed on to consumers anyway. The idea that the producer pays is not going to work in this instance because pubs cannot change the packaging they use, so the consumer will end up paying, which is extremely problematic. The cost will be about 5p to 7p on every bottle of beer and around 15p on a bottle of wine; that might not seem like a great increase for a one-off purchase, but it will cost consumers an extra £154 million a year to buy bottled beer, which is quite considerable.

It is crucial that businesses are supported in transitioning to this scheme, because they are already struggling with the employer's national insurance hike, the business rate increase and, for wine merchants, the changes to the way that duty is paid. I call on the Minister to take a sensible, common-sense approach to this issue and to consider an exemption from EPR for pubs. We should also reconsider the scope and timeline of its implementation, because we are at risk of delivering a crippling blow to hospitality and the drinks industry, which are already struggling with huge headwinds.

In the time that I have left, I will mention the example of a wine merchant—Members may wonder how I know this information. The wine merchant in question has a turnover of £25 million and makes profits of only £500,000 a year. That is a 5% profit margin, and this wine merchant is unusual in that it is quite profitable. EPR is estimated to cost it £272,000, more than 50% of its current profit margin, so there is no way that it will be able to avoid passing that on to the pubs and the consumers that buy from it.

The increase in national insurance will cost the wine merchant £92,000, and the ABV changes a further £262,000. It is a highly profitable and successful business of enormous longevity, but there may be no alternative for it other than putting up prices and laying people off. I urge the Minister to take into account these really serious concerns about the viability of businesses and to reconsider the implementation of this tax.

2.57 pm

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on securing the debate.

In the 10 months since I was elected MP for Ealing Southall, one issue has been raised with me more than any other: litter and fly-tipping. That is why I have made it my business as an MP to campaign on the issue, and that is why I welcome the extended producer responsibility regulations. They sound complicated, but they mean that the businesses that make the packaging that ends up on our streets and in our parks need to pay for that packaging to be recycled or disposed of. It is the polluter pays principle, and it makes complete sense to my constituents in Ealing Southall.

Up to now, local councils have had to pay the full cost of getting rid of that rubbish, and that means it is actually local council tax payers who foot the bill. That is not fair, and I know that my constituents will welcome

the businesses that produce the packaging finally being forced to pay for it. When they buy a SIM card on the internet, they wonder why it comes with so much plastic and paper packaging. The new system means that businesses will face extra costs for that, which will give them a reason to reduce packaging, taking rubbish out of the system in the first place. For my constituents, that will mean less cardboard and plastic strewn on our streets.

The new system will also mean that Ealing council will now get an extra £4.7 million this year from the levy. It sounds like a lot of money, but in fact it costs £30 million every year to collect and get rid of all our rubbish. It is only right that the people who produce the rubbish should have to pay at least some of that massive cost.

Sarah Champion: Will my hon. Friend please assure her constituents that the whole sector supports EPR, but that, because of the two-year lag, there will be more plastic on her streets, not less?

Deirdre Costigan: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I am afraid that the glass industry is perpetuating some of these untruths, and it just needs to get on board with the policy—it constantly wants to delay, but we need to make EPR happen now.

The glass industry says that it does not support the policy and that glass is more recyclable than other products. Let it tell that to my constituents, who see glass bottles in black sack fly-tips in parks, or dropped in little piles on streets where people have been street drinking, every day. In fact, just 43% of glass is recycled back into bottles. The glass industry also says that glass is being treated unfairly compared with plastic and cans, but plastic and cans will be included in the deposit return scheme, as we have already heard. Glass had the opportunity to be part of the scheme and the industry lobbied hard not to be included. I congratulate it—it did a good job—but it cannot get off scot-free. It is either part of the reverse vending machine plan or part of the “polluter pays” system that we are talking about today. It has to be in one or the other—it creates litter and it must pay for the cost of clearing it up. Council tax payers cannot be left to continue picking up the tab.

The glass industry also says that it is being charged more than it should be, because the fees are based on weight. As I have said, weight is important: the heavier a product is, the more it costs to transport for recycling. It is also breakable, which increases the cost further, and glass costs a lot more to recycle, both in money and in carbon, as the heat has to be so high. Recycled glass bottles use 75% of the energy needed to make new bottles, compared with just 15% for reuse. The charges in the plan are based on the estimated costs to councils of recycling glass, and the industry needs to understand that. Glass really does need to come up with a sustainable plan for reuse, rather than arguing against the tide of the “polluter pays” principle.

I know the published fees are still in draft so that the Minister and her Department can ensure they are fair and based on actual costs. I have a lot of sympathy for the pub and restaurant businesses that might be affected, but the Department is looking in detail at some of the points raised, so I am sure a sensible solution will be found. It is important to emphasise that clean streets are vital for pubs and restaurants—they will not make money if no one wants to go to their mucky town centre.

The final argument from the industry is that it does not think the fees it pays will be spent on waste and recycling. I have heard that a lot, but already my local council in Ealing is making plans to spend some of the money on cracking down on fly-tipping. It will use CCTV by Southall common and treat fly-tipping as an environmental crime with police tape and a cordon, based on work by Keep Britain Tidy. Ealing council also has plans to open a new reuse centre in Acton.

There are calls from the glass industry, as we have heard, to delay the “polluter pays” levy, but I strongly urge the Minister to resist those calls. The previous Government delayed taking action, which led to rubbish on our streets increasing by more than one third on their watch. People in Ealing Southall want cleaner streets. They are sick to death of bottles, cans, cardboard, mattresses, sofas and all the rest of it blighting their community. The Government have already shown they are deadly serious about making local areas feel loved again. Let us get on with sorting out the mess and bring in the new law to clean up our streets.

3.3 pm

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I start by thanking the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing this really important debate so that we can collectively put pressure on the Government.

Times are hard. Things cost more and people are genuinely unhappy. What we do not want is to take away their beer or make it more expensive. The beer or pub sector in my constituency of Woking supports more than 1,800 jobs and contributes £100 million to Woking’s local economy. That is probably not surprising, as we are home to Asahi UK, a huge brand that covers Fuller’s, Peroni and Cornish Orchards, to name a few. Pubs are generally much more than just a business. They are hubs in our high streets and at the centre of our community life—places we go to watch a football match or take our grandparent on a Sunday afternoon to make sure they get out of the house. They are a fun place to drink pints with a few of your friends. Who here has been to the pub after a funeral, sharing stories about loved ones? I know I have, at The Cricketers in Horsell in my constituency. The core of what we are speaking about today is that pubs are really important places for people, and I am worried that the Government’s rules will undermine that.

In grief or in happiness, the British pub is an integral institution and always there for us—or so we hope; but the future of the pub is under threat. The Government’s poorly designed EPR scheme is a production tax in all but name, placing more than £100 million of new annual costs on brewers for glass packaging alone. The Liberal Democrats support the goal of making packaging and manufacturing more sustainable. We have long advocated improved recycling and a well-designed deposit return scheme, but the current approach to EPR risks doing more harm than good. It heaps unpredictable and escalating costs on to producers great and small—whether that is Asahi or the small brewery in my constituency, Thurstons—without offering clarity or stability that businesses need to plan for the future. For local brewers or publicans already battling inflation and higher taxes, these additional costs affect jobs and investment. Disastrously, this cost

[Mr Will Forster]

is also passed on to people going down the pub or buying a bottle of what they fancy from a shop. In Woking, it means a direct hit to ordinary people already struggling with the cost of living crisis.

This issue extends beyond my constituency. What is worse, this scheme is supposed to apply only to household waste, but the way it is currently designed means that pubs are charged double. Despite already paying for commercial waste collection, they now face an additional £60 million burden across the sector, with some larger venues expected to pay up to £2,000 extra each year. Even the Government have acknowledged that that is a flaw, yet this will not be fixed until year three of the scheme. That delay is not acceptable. Why should a struggling local pub in Woking, or any other constituency for that matter, be forced to bear unnecessary costs for the next two years while the Government dither?

It gets worse. The Office for Budget Responsibility has rightly classified EPR as a tax, yet businesses still lack the basic clarity around the final fees, the reporting rules or even whether they will be liable. Such uncertainty is paralysing for businesses already hurt by international or local events. How can small brewers or pubs make investment decisions when they do not know the rules of the game they will be playing or what the liabilities will be?

The impact of EPR extends beyond hospitality. Let us talk about glass, as the hon. Member for Rotherham did. More than 60% of glass packaging in the UK is produced domestically, but the EPR scheme risks pushing manufacturers to abandon glass altogether in favour of cheaper, less sustainable materials, such as our old friend plastic. We have seen similar schemes in the United States drive glass manufacturers out altogether. In the UK, more than 6,000 people work in the glass sector, and penalising them is the wrong thing to do. I therefore ask, urge and implore the Minister to commit to reviewing EPR in order to support the food and drink sector, especially in my Woking constituency. The Liberal Democrats and I support environmental initiatives, but not at the cost of local jobs, economic growth or the viability of businesses that hold our communities together. The Government must rethink this scheme.

3.8 pm

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing this important debate.

As the MP for Burton and Uttoxeter, I am proud to represent my hometown and the home of British brewing. As I have said many times in this house, Burton's brewery heritage stretches back centuries, and our iconic breweries are known the world over not just for the quality of their beer, which I sample very regularly, but for the communities that they support and the skilled jobs that they sustain. Brewing is in our blood; it shapes our local economy, our identity and indeed the very character of our communities. When policies come forward that could affect the future of this proud industry, we must pay close attention. Extended producer responsibility is one such policy. The ambition behind it is good—we want to see more recycling, less waste and

a greener future—but the way this policy is being introduced risks real harm to businesses that are already working very hard to do the right thing.

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend is right that nobody is against the principle of recycling or the aims we are trying to achieve, but the policy is having unintended consequences for many small brewers and small pubs, which have very tight overheads. In some cases, the cost of EPR is more than their total profit, which is why I hope the Government will look again and come back with a revised scheme.

Jacob Collier: Absolutely—I am just about to make that point. Under the current plans, brewers, particularly those using glass bottles, face more than £150 million a year in new charges. That is not a minor adjustment. For some producers it could be the difference between profit and loss, in a sector that is already under huge strain.

The impact does not stop at the brewery gate. Pubs, many of which already pay for their own commercial waste disposal, will be charged again under EPR. That double payment for the same waste will cost up to £2,000 a year for larger venues. While DEFRA has acknowledged that this is a flaw in the system, a fix is not expected for another two years. In the meantime, pubs will foot the bill.

EPR will have a direct impact in my constituency, which has the most brewing jobs of any constituency in the UK and is home to companies such as Punch and Greene King, and to brewers such as Molson Coors and Marston's. The policy will stifle growth and investment at a time when they are the Government's No. 1 mission. There is also confusion about how EPR should be classified. The Office for Budget Responsibility calls it a tax, whereas DEFRA calls it a levy.

That lack of clarity really matters. Businesses in my constituency and around the country need certainty to invest, plan and grow, and at the moment they do not have it. Perhaps most frustratingly of all, according to the Government's own analysis these changes might not meaningfully improve recycling rates. We risk burdening brewers and pubs with new costs without a guarantee that EPR will actually deliver the environmental benefits that we want to see.

Nobody is asking for the goals of EPR to be abandoned, but we need to make sure that the system works for the environment and for British industry, local jobs and communities such as mine that depend on them. Burton's brewers have survived wars, recessions and global pandemics. They can continue to thrive with the right support, but they cannot and should not be asked to carry an unfair burden. Will the Minister please listen to the industry and work together with us to get this right?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. We are running out of time, so I will reduce the time limit to four minutes.

3.12 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I give a special thanks to the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for setting the scene so well—Champion by name and champion by nature. Well done.

We are all aware of the need to be good stewards of this planet, and for that reason we have set ourselves goals and targets that I support. The hon. Lady raised the practicality of those goals—it is not that we do not agree with them; we all accept their principle, but the question is how we achieve them in a way that does not affect the businesses that will feel the pain the most. It is a pleasure to see the Minister in her place; I think she and I previously discussed this in a debate in the Chamber just before Christmas.

In Northern Ireland, as is becoming the norm, we have different recycling obligations. The Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 amend the Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 to update the glass remelt formula by increasing the proportion of glass packaging waste that producers must recycle by remelt by 3 percentage points to 75%.

We are all agreed on the need to have something. The packaging and packaging waste directive is included in annex 2 of the Windsor framework, about which the Minister and I spoke during our discussion in the Chamber. That means that the directive will continue to apply in Northern Ireland following the UK's EU exit. It is currently anticipated that this will be the final year of the 2007 regulations being in force, with extended producer responsibility for packaging expected to be introduced this year. For the *Hansard* record, what discussions has the Minister had with the Northern Ireland Assembly—I know she has had them, but can we have that on record?

Over the past three years, the target for glass recycling has been stuck at 82%. Our local councils are doing a grand job with kerbside glass collection, and that has changed mindsets, including my own. Changing mindsets has been important, so that all glass goes into that small bin in the kitchen, then is taken down to the recycling centre or left at the end of the road for the council to collect. However, more can be done to ensure that packaging is made from recycled products when possible and financially viable. I believe that that is something that the phased scheme is capable of achieving.

The bottom line for me, as well as for the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), is ensuring that additional obligations on businesses are financially viable. I do not use that term lightly; I believe that a business should not have to choose between reasonable profit and meeting its obligations. Although the phasing in of the scheme has given a taster, I underline the concerns of the metal, food packaging and glass industry associations. My understanding is the same as that of the hon. Lady: the profit margin is as tight as it can be. If it is that tight, it will not take very much to throw businesses over the line and for them to find themselves in financial difficulties, so I thank the hon. Lady for that introduction.

The concern is that calculating base fees based on the weight of packaging will put a disproportionate cost burden on heavier materials and might cause a market distortion towards less environmentally friendly materials, which would go against many principles. Glass is one such sector. I understand that the Government have indicated their willingness to assess the matter and I look to the Minister to provide assurance that that is, and will remain, the case.

We must ensure that our businesses can produce at a price point that is attractive, and not have people considering importation because of the massive variation in cost. We have no control whatsoever over recycling obligations for imports. We must meet the targets, but only by bringing businesses along with us, not by leaving them behind or giving them financial obligations that they will find hard to achieve. I know that that is the Minister's desire, and it will hopefully be the aim for the coming years.

3.17 pm

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing such an important debate.

There are 51 pubs in my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent South, supporting 1,280 local jobs and contributing more than £40 million to our local economy. However, I have heard repeatedly from breweries and pubs in my constituency that the extended producer responsibility for packaging will have a substantial cost implication for those pubs, particularly for the smaller ones, which struggle to absorb additional costs. Although the scheme covers household waste, most glass pub products are classified as household waste, and as such, they are not exempt from EPR fees. Pubs now face a double whammy, as they will have to pay EPR fees on top of the costs that they already pay for waste collection and recycling through private contracts. Although I greatly welcome plans to amend that in the coming years, in the meantime, large pubs face, on average, costs of £2,000 per year.

We know that brewers have slim profit margins already, at roughly 2p per bottle, so the EPR levy—or tax—threatens to eliminate those margins, and I worry that consumers will pay the brunt. In fact, the Government's own analysis estimates that around 85% of EPR costs will be passed on to consumers. For bottled beer, that could mean an extra 5p to 7p per bottle—my Jim would really be annoyed about that. We risk driving up the cost of food and drink in our local pubs, potentially deterring customers and weakening the competitiveness of our sector.

Heineken supports several pubs in my constituency, including the Spotgate, the Black Lake Inn, where I had a nice meal on Sunday, the White Hart, the Swynnerton Arms, the Roebuck Inn and the Princess Royal. I have heard directly from them about the real impact that EPR fees are having on their businesses. I know that there is a plan to adjust EPR fees in two years' time, based on the environmental impact of packaging materials. However, under the current fee structure, which involves charging per tonne of packaging material, different packaging materials are charged at different prices. Often, packaging materials with the best recycling record pay the most, which is particularly damaging for businesses such as pubs, which rely on glass packaging.

As a Stoke-on-Trent MP, it would be remiss of me not to mention the ongoing impact on the ceramics companies in my constituency. Heavy-duty packaging materials, such as glass and steel, which are commonly used by ceramics manufacturers, attract higher EPR costs due to their weight. The health of the ceramics industry relies on the glass industry. We cannot make glass without ceramics refractories. If the glass industry is on its knees, that will have a knock-on effect on the ceramics manufacturers.

[Dr Allison Gardner]

Although I appreciate that the implementation has already been delayed twice, I urge the Minister to rethink or to provide a clear and fixed date with at least one year's notice. Businesses need that certainty to plan, invest and transition smoothly, without the disruption caused by shifting timelines.

3.20 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing this debate, and for her frank and wide-ranging speech. I will use my time to highlight the significant and growing concerns within the hospitality sector, particularly in our pubs.

The principle behind EPR—ensuring that producers take responsibility for the packaging waste that they create—has my full support. It is absolutely right that we strive to reduce waste, increase recycling, and shift towards a more sustainable circular economy. In delivering these changes, however, we must also ensure that we do not unfairly burden working people or the businesses that serve our communities, especially when many of them are already doing their part.

A truly circular economy means designing waste out of our systems and reusing valuable materials like glass. Glass is one of the most recyclable materials that we have, and in the hospitality sector it has been instrumental in supporting closed-loop recycling systems, not just recently but for decades.

The Government have highlighted the development of the EPR policy since 2019. I acknowledge the points raised in a written response to me from the Minister, which outlined the extensive consultations undertaken in 2019, 2021, and 2023 on the implementation of the legislation. It is clear that the Government have engaged with stakeholders, including glass manufacturers, to shape the policy and assess business impacts. Despite the consultation, concerns remain, particularly among those at the frontline of hospitality, about the unintended consequences of this otherwise positive step forward.

I echo what has been said about the specific challenges those on the frontline face, and ask whether the Minister will consider targeted adjustments that would maintain the integrity of the scheme while ensuring fairness for businesses that are already contributing to recycling efforts. Specifically, the classification of glass packaging used in pubs as household waste, as has been said, is estimated to cost pubs £2,500 a year on top of the other cost increases they face. That is despite them already managing their waste through commercial channels, at a relatively high cost that often rises above inflation.

Pubs are assets to communities in Britain. They are not just alcohol vendors, but places for people to hold what might be the only conversation they have that day. They are community centres, workplaces, incubators for the hospitality staff of tomorrow, and linchpins of many village economies. However, the British Beer and Pub Association estimates that the double charging that the EPR could inadvertently bring in could add between 5p and 7p to every bottle of beer sold in the UK. The risk is that the producers of beer will be discouraged

from using glass and could gravitate towards alternatives, such as plastic, which although lighter, does not offer the same level of recyclability.

There is a level of unfairness in the proposed EPR fees for pubs, which, as other hon. Members have stated, will effectively pay twice for waste collection. The fact that the OBR has defined EPR as a tax but DEFRA deems it a levy, has left pubs uncertain as to whether costs will have to be absorbed by businesses or whether they will be passed on to their customers, something that could depress demand and make it even harder for businesses to plan for the future.

We must get the implementation of EPR right, so that we achieve environmental progress without putting an unfair burden on the very people and businesses who keep our communities going. Pubs, brewers, and hospitality businesses are already doing their bit. I hope that the Government will ensure that their policies rightly reflect and reward that effort.

3.23 pm

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on securing this debate, although I fear she is not going to agree with what I am about to say.

Glass is one of the most used materials in the world—we have used it for thousands of years. In ancient times, glassmaking was viewed as mysterious and magical. It is a really special product and we use a lot of it in this country. I think that the extended producer responsibility is the right way to go. We are talking about recycling, reusing and reducing. There is a business in my constituency called ecoSIP, run by a man called Alex Taylor. He is a supporter of the EPR scheme; I suspect that the Minister will be pleased that there is a business that does support it. He wrote to me and said:

“We are supporters of the EPR scheme. We believe it forces companies to take responsibility for the emissions and waste that they create, and provides incentives to decarbonise.”

He is part of a UK-led green packaging revolution. It is happening in Leighton Buzzard, but also across the east of England—in Ipswich, for example—and right across our country. EcoSIP is on a mission to decarbonise the drinks industry with lightweight, low-carbon packaging. I have been to visit and I have seen the little packages used for its wine. Each pouch uses just 2.5 grams of material. Its packaging uses 90% less CO₂ than glass, yet the wine inside tastes just as good. We need to take that on board, not least because we are in the midst of a climate emergency.

Deirdre Costigan: Is my hon. Friend aware of Frugalpac, which produces wine containers in Ipswich, and is similarly trying to wean us off our reliance on glass and other unsustainable packaging and to offer green jobs in this country?

Alex Mayer: I am absolutely aware of Frugalpac in Ipswich. The east of England, where I am from, is leading the charge.

These modern green manufacturing organisations face certain issues. I urge the Minister to talk to other Departments as well, not least about the Weights and Measures (Intoxicating Liquor) Order 1988, which I am told makes it illegal to sell 125 ml portions, which is

what an average person would normally order as a glass of wine, in this modern packaging. There is stuff to be done, but luckily that is not a DEFRA thing.

There will always be a role for glass. It looks pretty—there is a bottle of it here. I love my Bonne Maman jars. We are never going to be able to turn an ecoSIP container into a candlestick holder. But we have to crack down on waste and boost recycling. The extended producer responsibility is an important first step, not least because it will also create 21,000 jobs and put a £10 billion investment into recycling, which is really welcome. In conclusion, I urge the Minister not to bottle it and to make sure that she goes full steam ahead.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): We now move on to Front-Bench spokespeople, starting with Sarah Dyke for the Lib Dems.

3.27 pm

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Stringer, and to speak on behalf of the Liberal Democrats on this important issue. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on securing the debate.

It is right that the Government are taking action to make manufacturing and packaging more sustainable. Recycling is essential for protecting natural resources and reducing the environmental impact of waste, but given that only 9% of plastic ever produced has been recycled, it has never been more urgent to make packaging more sustainable. The introduction of EPR can help us to achieve that, but it is important that it does not come at the cost of business viability.

The Liberal Democrats have real concerns that the EPR scheme, as it stands, will put the financial stability of small and medium-sized businesses at risk. Further uncertainty and instability for these businesses must be avoided, especially as they navigate the aftermath of the previous Conservative Government's economic mismanagement and try to find a way through the challenges being put on them by the current Government.

Representatives from the pub, beer and cider sectors have told me that they are really concerned about the impact that EPR will have on their businesses. The drinks sector in Glastonbury and Somerton supports 101 pubs and over 1,200 local jobs, and contributes £29 million to the local economy. Profit margins for many of these businesses are paper thin, and they will have no choice but to pass on the additional costs they incur to their customers.

That is backed up by DEFRA's impact assessment, which confirms that 85% of the costs will be passed on to consumers. Research from the British Beer and Pub Association has found that EPR could add £154 million a year to the cost of beer bottles, negatively impacting many traditional beer and cider-producing businesses that use glass bottles. The Society of Independent Brewers and Associates has noted that the implementation of EPR in its current form will likely have a significant impact on small independent breweries, pubs and consumers.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I should declare an interest, as chair of the Scotch whisky all-party parliamentary group.

My hon. Friend mentions independent brewers. Independent distilleries in North East Fife and elsewhere in Scotland face a real challenge, because they often do not produce separate bottles for hospitality and for other consumers. Does she agree that the Government need to look at that in their consultation, because those businesses will end up being taken into EPR through both household waste and hospitality?

Sarah Dyke: My hon. Friend makes a really good point. Those are, indeed, the unintended consequences we will see if the scheme is rolled out in its current form.

I am really worried about how this will impact the independent pubs in my constituency such as the Etsume Arms in Somerton, which prides itself on celebrating brilliant local brewers. This comes at a time when the UK has lost a hundred small breweries in the past year alone, with many more facing costs that they cannot absorb by themselves.

Glastonbury and Somerton is home to breweries such as Glastonbury Ales and Fine Tuned Brewery, near Somerton, as well as distilleries such as the Spirit of Glastonbury gin company. I visited Fine Tuned Brewery earlier this year to hear about some of the challenges that small breweries face, and the people who run the brewery explained their concerns about the impact that EPR will have on their business. They feel like they have been left in the dark due to poor communication from DEFRA.

It is clear that the knock-on costs of EPR will have an impact on these businesses. In fact, many in the industry are concerned that beer and cider producers might be incentivised to switch to less costly packaging such as aluminium or plastic. Those materials are more difficult to recycle than glass, so there is a risk that the scheme will achieve the opposite of its intentions. This potential backward shift in material usage may be only two years away, when the deposit return scheme comes into force.

In addition—and this concern has been echoed by many Members today—I have spoken to people in the industry who say it is clear that producers may end up paying twice for hospitality and business waste packaging under the current guidelines: once for existing waste collection and then again through EPR. I hope the Minister will comment on this uncertainty and provide businesses with the clarity they need.

On Sunday, people across my wonderful county celebrated Somerset Day and the important traditions of the region. One such deep-seated tradition is cider making. It is an economically significant and indispensable part of Somerset's cultural fabric. Glastonbury and Somerton is home to fantastic producers such as Dowding's in Wincanton, King Brain in Little Weston, Burrow Hill in Kingsbury Episcopi, Tricky Cider in Low Ham, Harry's Cider in Long Sutton, Hecks Cider in Street and Bere Cider in Bere, near Aller, to name just a few.

Cider makers are fully supportive of a circular economy, but many are worried about how EPR might make their businesses unviable. Many cider producers operate on thin profit margins, as I have said, and some may struggle to remain viable if they are laden with these additional costs. The National Association of Cider Makers has expressed frustration that the introduction of EPR does not align with the introduction of the DRS in two years' time. While the full costs of EPR will

[Sarah Dyke]

not be confirmed until June, the hammer blow is already being felt. Businesses have been experiencing disruption since its introduction last month, making it very difficult for them to plan effectively.

Combined with other costs, EPR is squeezing profitability and threatening employment. Given the economic importance of cider makers, whether through the people they employ or the cider apple-growing farms they partner with, it is a massive concern to many in Somerset that these additional costs could seriously damage the industry.

When I held a very well-attended cider blossom season tasting event in Parliament earlier this year, a cider maker told me that cider is often seen as synonymous with Britain, and that British cider's terroir is something that no other country can replicate. Cider making is a unique industry, so the costs of EPR must be proportionate and producers must be supported as they move towards a circular economy, rather than being forced out of business.

The Liberal Democrats know how important it is that businesses are given the notice, support and time they need to plan and adjust. The lack of clear information on the final fees and the timing of the start of producer liability creates challenges for business planning. I hope the Minister can give some clarity on that matter today.

The Liberal Democrats believe it is crucial that businesses are supported in this transition, especially when they have already been hit by higher employer national insurance contributions and higher business rates, as has been outlined by my colleagues today. We have concerns not only about how EPR's implementation might affect small businesses but about how the scheme will be regulated.

The Environment Agency is already severely underfunded and struggles to fulfil its regulatory obligations on water quality. Consequently, we are cautious about EPR and want to ensure that it comes with appropriate support and additional funding for the Environment Agency to meet this additional responsibility.

Likewise, given that EPR changes the way local authorities will be required to manage household recycling, we believe that the role of local authorities in the scheme must be properly supported—they are constantly being asked to do more and more with less and less.

The Liberal Democrats recognise the importance of making packaging more sustainable, which is why we have long been committed to introducing a deposit return scheme for food and drink bottles and containers. It is also why we want to see the complete elimination of non-recyclable, single-use plastics within three years, and why we want to end plastic waste exports by 2030. However, we are also clear that those ambitions must be achieved by working collaboratively with industry to ensure that small drinks businesses are not left behind or struggle to remain viable. If we do not deal with this issue, then less recyclable and less circular materials, or cheaper imported glass with a larger carbon footprint, will become a more viable option for businesses in a sector in which the margins are already very tight.

3.38 pm

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rotherham

(Sarah Champion) on securing this important debate, which provides an opportunity to examine the matter further. I also congratulate colleagues from across the House, and across the country, for their powerful contributions referencing the glass manufacturers, pubs, breweries, distilleries and other affected businesses in their constituencies.

As we have heard, pubs are an important part of our local communities, and of our social and family interactions, in both happy and sad times. A number of pubs have been namechecked today, and we have had a cider tour. I believe that even Heineken was namechecked, and, from memory, it refreshes the parts that other beers cannot reach.

The hon. Member for Rotherham made a powerful speech in which she advocated very strongly for Beatson Clark, a major manufacturer in her constituency that plays an important role in producing the amber glass for medicine bottles.

We Conservatives have a proud record of environmental stewardship. Between 2010 and 2022, we successfully reduced the amount of waste going to landfill by 47% and the amount of biodegradable waste going to landfill by 46%. We also introduced a simpler recycling collection system to make it easier to recycle, saving people time and preventing confusion to boost recycling rates. Additionally, our introduction of the single-use plastic bag charge in 2015 saw a remarkable 95% cut in sales of plastic bags in major supermarkets, significantly reducing plastic waste.

We also passed the landmark Environment Act 2021 and set targets to tackle some of the biggest pressures facing our environment. That includes ensuring progress on clean air, clean and plentiful water, less waste, a more sustainable use of our resources, a step change in tree planting, a better marine environment, and a more diverse, resilient and healthy natural environment. In addition, the Act includes a new, historic and legally binding target to halt decline in species by 2030.

However, we must acknowledge that challenges persist. Concerningly, household waste recycling rates have plateaued. The latest published data from December 2024 showed a small decline from 44.6% in 2021 to 44.1%. However, there were some positives: notably, a rise in packaging waste recycling from 62.4% in 2022 to 64.8% in 2023.

The previous Conservative Government laid the foundations for progress in recycling and enhancing the circular economy by embracing the "polluter pays" principle to drive up recycling and improve resource efficiency. The Labour Government have attempted to take up the Conservative baton, but as ever with their implementation, the devil is in the detail. Although further action is needed to drive up recycling rates, significant concerns have been raised about the extended producer responsibility scheme in its current form, including issues relating to fee calculations, consistency across the devolved nations, cross-border business implications and the timing of the scheme's roll-out, given the new financial challenges that this Government have bestowed upon businesses.

Although some aspects of the EPR scheme have come into effect, including data reporting, businesses are yet to feel the fee element. For example, waste disposal fees—otherwise called waste management fees—

which need to be paid for packaging that is classified as household packaging, commonly binned packaging or glass household drinks containers, will be invoiced from October 2025. That invoice will be for fees for packaging placed on the market in 2024.

Modulated fees—an extension of waste disposal fees—are scheduled to come into effect in 2026 and will add a financial incentive or penalty, taking into account the environmental impact and recyclability of specific packaging formats. Therefore, hard-to-recycle packaging may face a higher fee.

This debate is focused on glass, and Members will no doubt be aware of concerns raised by the British Glass Manufacturers Confederation about waste disposal fees. Although it is welcome that the Government have clarified that they are looking at weight-based fees, there are concerns that glass will still be significantly impacted. As has been said today, there is much uncertainty about how the fees will be calculated, thereby penalising glass.

The spirits industry is an important part of the UK economy, and there are many spirit businesses operating across the UK. The UK Spirits Alliance has also raised concerns about the potential economic impact of those fees on the industry, which supports more than 446,000 jobs and contributes £13 billion annually to the UK economy. Disproportionate treatment of glass could threaten that vital sector. I understand that DEFRA has suggested that 80% of the cost of EPR will be passed on to the consumer. Small and medium-sized producers, including independent distillers, will have to make the difficult decision either to absorb the cost or pass it on.

The British Beer and Pub Association estimates that EPR fees will add 5p to 7p per beer bottle, equating to £154 million in additional annual costs. Alarming, the Office for Budget Responsibility has warned that EPR is unlikely to have a material impact on recycling rates, which raises questions about whether this iteration of the scheme is effective in achieving its environmental aims.

With that in mind, I would be grateful if the Minister could clarify whether the Government believe that glass, which is 100% recyclable, should have higher or lower waste disposal fees than plastic or aluminium. Furthermore, will she confirm what assessment has been made of the potential damage to the glass industry from the waste disposal fees, taking into account both the economic cost and the impact on jobs? Is she concerned that high waste disposal fees for glass may result in a shift in packaging to plastic, which may ultimately undermine the UK's environmental goals?

Will the Minister also outline how the UK Government are working with the devolved nations to implement the EPR? What differences will there be nation to nation? What impact will that have on businesses operating across borders? For example, how will the Scottish Government's decision to include glass in the DRS impact the roll-out of England's EPR? It is so important to have joined-up thinking and policy implementation across our United Kingdom in sectors that span our domestic borders. Will the Minister also clarify whether the Government have ambitions to expand the EPR scheme to any other industries? If so, will impact assessments be carried out? In the light of the OBR's assessment of the EPR, how will the Government seek to increase recycling rates?

I mentioned the timing of the roll-out of the EPR, and it is important to highlight how significant that is. The scheme, which imposes additional costs on businesses, is being introduced at a time when the Labour Government have caused significant uncertainty and pressure for businesses. The introduction of Labour's jobs tax—the increase in national insurance contributions—means that businesses face an extra £900 in national insurance costs per employee. For many businesses, that may lead to job cuts, wage freezes or investment being put on hold. Sadly, in some cases, it may lead to businesses being shut down. If a business is able to survive, it is likely that those additional costs will be passed on to consumers.

Given that context, it is only right to consider whether it is appropriate to add further costs on businesses, however commendable the aim. His Majesty's most loyal Opposition will continue to scrutinise these developments closely and ensure that the concerns of businesses and consumers are not ignored, while we continue to protect our precious environment.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Minister, will you try to leave a short time for the proposer to wind up the debate?

3.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): I am grateful for that guidance, Mr Stringer. I did not do that last week, so the Clerks have clearly made a mark against my name. I will do my best, and I have my team on standby to yank me down, as I am sure you will do. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship today.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for asking for this debate. She has been a doughty supporter of Beatson Clark in her constituency and of the glass industry in general. I also thank hon. Members from across the parties who have made valuable points today.

The aim of the reforms is to create a more circular and resource-efficient economy. They are the biggest reforms in a generation. The three elements—simpler recycling, DRS and extended producer responsibility for packaging—will turn the dial on recycling rates, which, as the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson) said, have stagnated over the past 15 years and are bumping along at 42% to 44%. Assessments show that getting our household recycling rate up to 65% over the next 10 years will drive £10 billion of new investment in the British economy and create 21,000 new jobs.

Sarah Champion: Will the Minister give way?

Mary Creagh: I will make some progress and then give way.

UK circular industries—those that keep products and materials in circulation for as long as possible—currently deliver £67 billion a year to the economy, up from £44 billion in 2008, and provide 827,000 jobs. My hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) talked about the innovators in her constituency creating new packaging. I will take away the point about weights and measures and see what we can do in a cross-ministerial way.

Sarah Champion: Will the Minister give way?

Mary Creagh: I will give time at the end but I want to make some progress.

The annual growth rate of circular industries is 3%, more than double the UK's overall growth rate of 1.2%. Extended producer responsibility for packaging—pEPR—moves recycling costs from taxpayers to packaging producers. Think about it: not everybody drinks and not everybody shops online, but we are all paying for the costs of collection. We have had a great tour of drinking places, hostellers and amazing producers, but at the moment everybody in the country is paying for that, through council tax and general taxation. These reforms are creating systematic change, and that is hard.

Simpler recycling in England will make recycling easier and consistent. People will be able to recycle the same materials, including glass, whether they are at home, work or school, which will create a step change in the quality and quantity of recycle streams. That is enabled by pEPR, which will pay for the new costs associated with the change, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) mentioned.

We are also introducing deposit return schemes in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland that add refundable deposits to single-use plastic, steel and aluminium containers. I discussed this with my colleague in Northern Ireland last week at the British-Irish Council environment ministerial meeting at Kew Gardens. We had a two-hour debate about how we would co-operate on the circular economy, in particular looking at the challenges of Guernsey, Jersey and the Isle of Man— island economies with no real reprocessing facilities—and what we can all learn from each other.

Wendy Chamberlain: Will the Minister give way?

Mary Creagh: I am going to make some headway.

DRSs cut litter, boost recycling rates to more than 90% and create high-quality materials that industry can reuse. Since it launched in 2024, the Republic of Ireland's DRS has seen over 1 billion containers returned and a near 50% reduction in drinks container litter. Last week, I met Timmy Dooley, the Minister of State for Environment, Climate and Communications in the Republic of Ireland, who he said he had been sceptical of the DRS but now has the zeal of a convert.

This challenge is changing the way in which retailers and producers think about eco-design. Walkers is starting to use paper-based packaging for crisp multipacks, and many supermarkets are now using paper rather than plastic trays for fresh food. Our vision is to become world leaders in circular design, technology and industry.

These reforms were started by Michael Gove, late of this parish, back in 2018—seven years ago. I remember successive Secretaries of State for DEFRA coming to the Environmental Audit Committee, when I was Chair, and promising these reforms and deposit return schemes. There has been extensive engagement and consultation with business on pEPR, including public consultations in 2019 and 2021. Businesses have had a clear indication, and the scheme has already been delayed twice.

My officials run monthly packaging engagement forums, which regularly draw more than 1,000 attendees, to provide updates and test policy development with stakeholders.

I have met British Glass several times to hear its concerns. I met Heineken last September. I met British Glass in October 2024, and then in January at a glass reuse roundtable hosted by the British Beer and Pub Association at the Budweiser Brewing Group. On 11 February, the Minister of State, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon West (Sarah Jones), joined me to discuss the glass sector. We have engaged on this issue.

The glass sector lobbied extensively to be excluded from the deposit return scheme. We respected that position, and kept that approach during the final passage of the DRS and pEPR legislation. Legislation on pEPR was supported on both sides of the House, but sadly the DRS was not. My officials have talked with businesses that make and use glass packaging, and we have listened to feedback to ensure that the fees are set fairly. I am very aware of the issues that the glass sector has raised about dual-use items—items that can be disposed of in either business or household waste streams. It has been difficult to find an answer that works for everyone, and because of the issues raised in the debate, I have asked my officials to consult with industry immediately to find the fairest solution.

There has been a lot of talk about small businesses. Many international pEPR schemes offer no exemption for small business. We responded to UK small business concerns by putting in place some of the most generous exemptions of any scheme globally. The exemptions mean that businesses with a turnover of below £2 million, or that place less than 50 tonnes of packaging on the market, are not obliged to pay fees. Those exemptions apply to approximately 70% of UK businesses supplying packaging in the UK. There are quarterly payment options to help with cash flow for larger businesses, and we will watch the de minimis thresholds carefully. If we raised the thresholds, that would put costs on to the remaining businesses, because local authority collection costs would remain the same.

The pEPR fees for glass are lower than those for aluminium and plastic. Because glass packaging is heavier, it costs more to handle per unit than some other materials. We have worked closely with industry and local authorities to make sure that the costs used to set producer fees accurately reflect the on-the-ground waste management operation costs that every taxpayer currently has to pay. Weight is a driving factor in waste management and it is the most common basis used to determine costs for public and private sector collection; that is why it is central to our approach. But the scheme relies on all producers paying their fair share. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall said, there was a range, but there was unhappiness with that, so in December we introduced a set point of £240 per tonne. The fewer free riders there are in the system—

Helen Morgan: Will the hon. Member give way?

Mary Creagh: Let me finish my point; I have not made it yet.

The fewer that do not report and pay on their packaging, the lower the fees will be for everybody. That point was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham in previous debates: some people do not report their packaging. I have instructed my officials to work with regulators. We have done a sprint on that and tracked

down about 1,800 suspected free riders, with a little over 200 companies under review. I pay tribute to the Environment Agency officials up in Sheffield who have done that, and to agency officials and the Met police, who last week arrested two individuals in London for packaging export note fraud and suspected money laundering. We are going to keep this under review. This work is having a real impact. We will publish the year one base fees in June, and I am optimistic that the result will be an improved picture.

I am happy to give way if Members still have questions.

Helen Morgan: Businesses really need to know what that rate will be as soon as possible. The financial year has already started, they have very little headroom in their cash flows and they need to be able to plan. Will the Minister commit to give us that number as soon as possible?

Mary Creagh: That number will be published by the end of June and businesses are aware of that timescale.

Dr Gardner: There are wider issues with EPR, including for innovative companies supplying new types of packaging. Woolcool produces wool-based packaging that is compostable and biodegradable, but it is classed as worse than polystyrene because it is so innovative that it is unclassified. Will the Minister agree to look into that?

Mary Creagh: I will look into that. I know that wool is used in certain packaging situations. In a way, its usage is too small to register, but we will look at all these innovative ideas and how we keep things in circulation for as long as possible. My hon. Friend the Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier) mentioned many pubs—did he mention Greene King?

Jacob Collier indicated assent.

Mary Creagh: He did. Greene King, of Bury St Edmunds, has already started using reusable glass bottles in 65 pubs served by its Runcorn depot. It has collected over half a million bottles since January. I reassure hon. Members that I am alive to these issues and we hope to make further progress.

3.58 pm

Sarah Champion: I decided not to intervene on the Minister because we have had this argument a lot and she still does not seem to be hearing a whole room of MPs bringing examples to her. She talked about all producers paying their fair share. I agree, and the glass sector agrees, but that is not happening because only glass is paying. The freeloaders the Minister talks about are currently plastic and aluminium. I am really supportive of all the other examples of packaging—absolutely, let us have all of them—but at the moment the Minister has a stark choice. She mentions the jobs that will be created; she does not mention those that will be lost. It is those jobs, and the likelihood of our losing the glass industry, that I urge her to focus on. She should pause the scheme, listen to and act on the concerns, and bring the whole scheme into force in October 2027, when the other two key materials will be in place. That is the only fair, just and, dare I say it, Labour way of doing this. At the moment the good guys are being punished, and people in our constituencies are going to lose their jobs.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of extended producer responsibility for packaging on glass packaging producers.

3.59 pm

Sitting suspended.

Carer's Leave

4.30 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered carer's leave.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Stringer. I declare my interest as both an honorary vice-president of Carers UK and a board member of the Fife Carers Centre, which celebrated its 30th anniversary last week.

It is now just shy of two years since my private Member's Bill, the Carer's Leave Act 2023, received Royal Assent, and a little over a year since the necessary regulations were passed to enact the legislation. It came after years of work by dedicated campaigners both within and outside Parliament, and I had the pleasure of meeting some of them at an event to celebrate the law passing. I said then what I say now, which is that by passing the Act, I stood on the shoulders of many who came before.

But the job is not done just because the law is passed. Employment rights are useful only if they are known about and enforceable, and if they solve the policy issue that they intend to. I want to use this debate to look at how the law has been working for unpaid carers over the past year. The myriad problems and hurdles faced by unpaid carers, or indeed anyone, are not solved by the magic of one private Member's Bill, as much as I wish they were—as politicians, I think we all wish they were. According to the latest census data from all four nations, there are at least 5.8 million people in the UK providing unpaid care for an ill, older or disabled family member or friend. Of those people, 2.8 million were recorded as balancing that caring responsibility with work.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. The hon. Lady is making an important speech and I thank her for her work on this issue. She will know about my passion to support unpaid carers, particularly young carers. She is giving some very important and high figures. However, is it likely that those figures are actually higher, because certainly many young carers, and I suspect it is the same with adult carers, do not recognise that they are carers?

Wendy Chamberlain: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point that out. I occasionally use my husband as an example in this debate. He cares for his elderly mother who is in her 90s, but he would not call himself a carer; it is just part of what he does as a son.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): A constituent of mine who lives in Glastonbury told me that she cares for her 95-year-old mum who needs constant assistance. She is concerned because not only is she having to spend more time with her as time goes on, but she has lost her winter fuel allowance and respite care is out of her reach. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is crucial that we introduce paid carer's leave to ensure that carers get the relief that they need while caring for their loved ones?

Wendy Chamberlain: My hon. Friend has anticipated some of my speech. There is no doubt that many unpaid carers want to care for their loved ones, but when they need respite or when the caring responsibility

becomes too much, they need a social care service to support them. That is one of the challenges that many of them face.

Irene Campbell (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): Thank you for securing the debate. It is an important topic and it is a privilege to be here. I used to do a lot of work with carers and young carers in my job in the NHS, and I used to visit some of the Ayrshire carers centres. One thing that people told me was important to them was getting a break, whether it be a day out or a few days away, and another was getting peer support from other carers. Respite has already been mentioned. Do you agree that it is important for carers to get a break and opportunities for peer support?

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members that I am not part of the debate. Can we revert to normal parliamentary language? I do not like correcting people. We have just been through the previous debate and I did not, but I think it is necessary.

Wendy Chamberlain: Thank you, Mr Stringer.

I am grateful for the intervention and I think the hon. Lady is absolutely right. In St Andrews in my constituency I met a group called the CRAP Carers—which stood for caring, resilient and positive. There is no doubt that the network of support that unpaid carers can access is really important.

We estimate that the value of the support that unpaid carers give to our economy equates to over £160 billion per year. That is to say that our care force is massive, and it needs valuing and supporting alongside every other industry. We also know, as Members have already touched on, that statistically being an unpaid carer makes someone worse off.

Early this year I hosted a policy breakfast with the Centre for Care at Sheffield University. Although the Minister could not attend, I am grateful that the Department for Business and Trade and the Department of Health and Social Care sent civil service representatives. We heard how the Centre for Care has been doing some important research on the impact of being an unpaid carer on income, which was published last year.

Staggeringly, the research finds an average relative income gap of up to 45% for those informal carers providing the most hours of care. I recommend that the Minister read the research; it is quite heavy on statistical analysis, but I am sure that the Centre for Care would be happy to meet with him, if it has not done so already. The academic research confirms what we already know from the surveys carried out by organisations such as Carers UK: unpaid carers are more likely to live in poverty, and doing something altruistic for the people you love makes you worse off.

The state of caring survey carried out by Carers UK for 2024 found that 40% of respondents had had to give up work, finding the juggle unmanageable, and of those still in employment, 44% had reduced their working hours, while a quarter had moved to a more junior role. That leaves the vast majority of unpaid carers with less money in their pockets every month. That is at a time when they may be living with the person they care for, and we know that there is a significant disability price tag. The personal independence payment down here,

and the adult disability payment in Scotland—now a devolved benefit—are vital, but they are not enough to make up that difference.

The issue is not just immediate poverty although that is a very real issue, but about tackling poverty among pensioners, especially women, who are still more likely to be unpaid carers and to subsequently reduce or stop working as a result. We have a gender pension gap because we have a gender pay gap. The latest Government data sets that gender pension gap at 35%, but other organisations put it much higher. We know that caring plays a large part in that.

Responding to Carers UK last year, over two thirds of carers who had given up work said that they were worried about managing in the future, while over half of those who had reduced their hours said that they had cut back on savings for their retirement. All of that matters, not just to the individuals and their families who are struggling or to those who have promising careers that never reach their potential, but to this Government, who need to respond to the rising rates of poverty among older people while trying to reduce the benefits bill.

The struggles that lead to people stepping back from work are entirely understandable. Caring is hard, tiring, stressful, time-consuming and does not neatly fit into our free hours of the day. Flexible working does make up some of that picture, which I am sure the Minister will acknowledge, but there will always be pinch moments when care arrangements need changing, extra hospital appointments need attending or where all the tiny acts of care and admin for a loved one cannot be fitted in and around work.

The risk is that people use up their holiday, which is something that all the evidence tells us is bad for their health—as the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) referred to in her intervention on respite. The Carer's Leave Act 2023 was aimed at solving that—or at the very least, helping with it. It was the first legal right for carers to take leave from work for caring. It was an acknowledgment of how hard it can be, aimed at prompting a conversation about support in employment.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Last night, an amendment to the Employment Rights Bill introducing paid carer's leave was debated in the House of Lords, where a Plaid Cymru colleague spoke from the experience of having been a young unpaid carer herself. In that debate, the Government Whip provided an update of the review into the Carer's Leave Act 2023. Does the hon. Member agree that the Government must, as part of that review, recognise that in order to make a true difference, carer's leave must be paid leave?

Wendy Chamberlain: I am grateful for that update on the progress of the Employment Rights Bill in the other place last night. My party's policy is for paid carer's leave, and I am conscious that my Act only formalised some of the less formal arrangements that many people undertake, but it hopefully prompts conversations with the employer. I hope the Government review will look at paid carer's leave and introduce it sooner rather than later. I would be more than happy if my Act were superseded.

One year on, the question is whether the policy is working. What do we know so far? It is clearly far too early to see an impact on poverty or even net employment rates, and I do not think the legislation that was passed is significant enough for that. Even if the statistics were available, there are too many moving parts to isolate cause and effect, but by now we should have a feeling of how well the Government are communicating advice about carer's leave to businesses. Are businesses updating their policies and systems for requesting and recording leave? Are they training their managers? Do their employees know about their rights? Would they feel comfortable using them? Has the dial been moved at all towards more carer-friendly workplaces?

My big worry in the first few months after the regulations passed was that the Government were not doing enough to tell businesses about the new rights and what was required of them. I accept that at that time we obviously had a general election and a new Government. For too long, the main advice on gov.uk was on a webpage for new businesses setting up for the first time. I am happy that that seems to have been remedied, and that using the search engine to look for carer's leave makes the right page pop up, but I am less comforted by the lack of resources on carer's leave, or on unpaid carers at all, on the Department for Business and Trade's website.

Yesterday, my team searched for “carer's leave” and found no results under “guidance and regulation”, no results under “research and statistics”, one result under “policy papers and consultations” and three under “news”, two of which were from when the law was passed two years ago. It appears that the Government's only interest in carer's leave is in announcing a review into how it is working. Given that I secured this debate, I am clearly happy to see how things are going and how we can improve them, but I venture to say that the Government risk abandoning their responsibilities to working carers if they do not take an interest in promoting the leave that is available right now. What are they doing to ensure businesses, big and small, know about the rights of their employees and are supported in implementing them? How is this information getting out to business owners and busy managers, who simply do not have the time to look up a right that they might not even know exists? The Department for Business and Trade and the Treasury have more power to reach companies than any other organisation. If the review finds later this year that companies did not know about the leave, and therefore that it has been ineffective, DBT will need to look at its own failings and at the fact that it did not do more.

The enforcement of legal rights is not the only way the Department can encourage carer-friendly workplaces. Businesses could be signposted to a whole range of resources, including guidance from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and the Employers for Carers network. Carer Positive in Scotland is done with the Scottish Government, and I am pleased to say that my office is a Carer Positive employer. There is no reason why similar initiatives could not at least be encouraged down here.

As to what is happening with businesses, we can get something of a snapshot from an employer survey report published by Carers UK in January. I say “something of a snapshot” for one big reason: the employers answering the surveys are those already tapped into the networks

[Wendy Chamberlain]

and already alive to the issues facing carers, so low levels of reform could indicate that less reform is needed because policies were already in place, and high improvements could be because the self-selecting group is motivated to go above and beyond. But there are some really promising findings in the responses. Almost 90% of responding organisations reported no challenges in implementing the Act. More than half have a dedicated carer's leave policy, compared with less than a quarter before the legislation came in. Some 23% of organisations saw an increase in uptake of their internal networks or support groups for employers. Many responded in free text that the law change had prompted greater understanding about what it means to be a carer, and about how people can move in and out of that status.

But there are a number of factors that I am worried about. The Government should be worried about them too, and should be looking at fixing them immediately, as well as in the longer review. Only three quarters of organisations told their employees about the new right—remember that these are the ones more likely to take action. That tallies with other research, which found that only two thirds of working carers know about carer's leave. Hundreds of people become carers every day, and most people do not pay attention on their intranet or in their work emails to things that are not relevant to them, so unless that information is easily accessible and reiterated regularly, the chances are that salience among working carers will continue to lessen as time passes.

Even for employees who know about the right, there is a reported reluctance to be open about caring responsibilities or to request time off: 15% of respondents to the State of Caring survey said that they were worried about a negative reaction to taking time off for caring. It is deeply worrying that some respondents said that even though their organisations had policies in place, their line managers blocked requests for support. We should never be hearing reports such as:

"I work for a large public sector organisation, how you are treated all depends on that one single manager",

or,

"My employer offers flexible working but my line manager doesn't and says carer's leave is for emergencies only which it isn't."

Given the integral need for line managers to implement carer-friendly policies, it is vital that businesses offer internal training and guidance. It is therefore worrying that of the organisations that responded to the survey on carer's leave, only a quarter had specifically raised awareness or provided training to managers on implementing the right to leave. If the kind of organisations that are already tapped in to Carer Positive networks are not doing that, it is not hard to imagine what is happening in areas where there is low support for carers. There is a role for the Government to make sure that rights for working carers are a reality, not just a piece of paper.

Finally, there is the elephant in the room that is paid carer's leave, which has already been referred to, and whether people can afford to take time off. I have always said that I want to see the legislation amended and upgraded. Last year, I worked with the Minister for Employment Rights, the hon. Member for Ellesmere

Port and Bromborough (Justin Madders), on the Delegated Legislation Committee considering the then draft Carer's Leave Regulations 2024. I recall that he, too, wanted it to be paid. He might reflect on his own frustrations with how long it took to see that law through, and ensure that the can is not kicked down the road.

I will leave it to colleagues to look to the future, but today, I urge the Government to take steps so that the current law—the Carer's Leave Act 2023—can reach its potential, is known about, talked about and accepted in our workplaces, and that it sparks conversations on what it means to be a carer and how work can be made to work for the unpaid carers that we all rely on.

Several hon. Members rose—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): I intend to call the Front Bench spokespeople at 5.10 pm, so hon. Members can work out the timings for themselves.

4.47 pm

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) on securing this important debate. She has been an advocate for carers throughout her parliamentary career, and I thank her for all her hard work.

Unpaid carers are the backbone of Britain's social care system. They carry out remarkable and irreplaceable roles, often with little help and too often at great personal cost. I would like to tell the story of one of my constituents, Sarah. She spent nearly 30 years as a full-time carer for her son, who has profound and complex needs. He suffered neurological damage before and during birth, and although he is verbal, he has severe autism and behavioural challenges, which, through no fault of his own, have dominated the lives of everyone around him. Sarah's story is one of lifelong dedication and unconditional love. For years, her son's unpredictable behaviour dictated his family's routine. He was excluded from multiple schools and, later, from supported living settings because his needs were too challenging to manage in shared environments. He now lives with one-to-one professional carers. The support that he receives is of a high standard, but it costs as much as all the benefits he receives.

Sarah no longer qualifies for carer's allowance because her son no longer lives at home. However, as a mother she remains deeply involved in his care. Over the years, she has given up work. She is approaching 60 with no pension or savings and with health problems of her own. On top of that, she now supports her elderly in-laws and ageing parents. Like so many others, she is a carer several times over—unseen, unpaid and exhausted. Sarah described herself to me as simply "broken" from years of having no room to breathe or recover.

Sarah contacted me not just because of the long hours of care or the loss of income, but because of the fear caused by the Government's proposed changes to disability benefits, especially the personal independence payment. Her son relies on PIP; the suggestion that that support could be taken away or turned into a voucher system has devastated Sarah's mental health. She told me that she cannot sleep and feels physically unwell from anxiety.

Carer's leave is designed to support those who give so much of themselves to care for family and friends, but we must ensure that that support is not undermined by other policies. When carers are able to share some of their responsibilities with professional services and return to work, they should encounter stability, not the prospect that they will have to return to full-time caring because of sudden changes. However, proposals such as the changes to PIP risk having exactly that effect, which causes immense anxiety among the very people who we claim to be helping, including Sarah, who worries whether her son will be affected or not.

Carer's allowance is just £81.90 a week, which is the lowest amount for a benefit of its kind. Worse still, carers are being punished for going even slightly over their earnings threshold. Tens of thousands of carers are being asked to repay thousands of pounds each, and often through no fault of their own. Indeed, many of them did not even know that they had gone over the threshold, and in many cases it was the Department for Work and Pensions that had failed to update their records in time. That is yet another example of carers being treated as an afterthought.

I am immensely proud that the Liberal Democrats, thanks to the hard work of my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife, passed the Carer's Leave Act 2023. The Act gives 2 million employees across the UK the legal right to at least one week of unpaid carer's leave each year, which was a crucial first step, but now we must go further and make that paid leave.

Caring is vital, emotionally draining and complex work, which deserved to be recognised as such. That is why we should introduce paid carer's leave and consult on extending the eligibility for it. We should also give unpaid carers a statutory guarantee of regular respite breaks, and not just when a council can afford them. We should also increase carer's allowance by at least £20 a week, with higher earning thresholds and a taper, so that people are not penalised for doing extra hours at work.

Sarah's story is not unique. Her exhaustion, her fear and her resilience are echoed in stories in millions of households up and down the country. We owe it to her and to every unpaid carer to stop taking them for granted.

4.51 pm

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) not just for securing this debate but for her tireless advocacy for carers. Her landmark Carer's Leave Act was a vital first step in recognising the contribution of unpaid carers, and showed just how committed the Liberal Democrats are to securing a fair deal for carers.

In Wales, the situation of carers is especially urgent. Over 310,000 people in Wales identify as unpaid carers—more than 10.5% of the population, which is a higher percentage than in any other UK nation. In some parts of my constituency, particularly in the Swansea valley, the figure is closer to 13%, which itself is likely to be an underestimate. Many carers do not realise that they qualify as such, so they go without vital support.

Ann Davies: The value of the 310,000 carers we have in Wales is £10 billion, so they are saving the Welsh economy—or the DWP here—£10 billion. Surely, we must have a system whereby carers, through the leave that they can receive, are empowered to apply for jobs that will give them the opportunity to work and care at the same time. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that having such a system is vital for the DWP's money to be used wisely?

David Chadwick: I absolutely agree. We have already heard in this debate some of the personal stories of people involved in caring and the challenges that they are taking on. The hon. Lady was quite right to point to the financial figures and the impact that this situation is having on our economy. For example, Powys Teaching Health Board has a deficit of just over £16 million a year, and it is paying another £16 million a year to other health boards to provide social care in our area. That highlights the contribution that unpaid carers make: if the gap were not being plugged by unpaid carers, the cost would be even higher.

Wales struggles more with the issue of unpaid carers than other UK nations because we have an ageing population, poorer health outcomes and rising levels of complex care needs. Our carers are stepping up where our social care system is stretched, but they do so at great personal cost, as has already been highlighted. They are disproportionately affected by poverty—unpaid carers in Wales are nearly twice as likely as other people to live in poverty and one in five of them are among the most deprived people in our society. For many of them, taking unpaid leave to care for a loved one simply is not an option; it is a financial risk that they simply cannot afford to take.

That is why the Carer's Leave Act matters, because it gives carers across the UK the legal right to five days of unpaid leave. However, that right is only meaningful if people can afford to use it and know about it. Recent data from Carers Wales shows that 55% of carers have not taken unpaid leave—not because they do not need it, but because they cannot afford to lose that income. A year on from the law taking effect, a third of carers in Wales still do not know their full rights.

This is not just about fairness—it is about economic reality. Both the UK and Welsh Governments have spoken about the importance of getting more people into work and driving economic growth. The work of unpaid carers saves the Welsh Government over £10 billion a year. Paid carer's leave is not a luxury but a necessity. It is a matter of dignity, equality and basic economic justice. I urge the Government to build on the ambition shown by the Liberal Democrats and commit to introducing paid carer's leave by the end of this Parliament. Carers should not be punished for their compassion. They should be supported, respected and recognised as the backbone of our caring system.

4.55 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I commend the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for leading the debate. It is a real pleasure to see her back in Westminster Hall leading a debate. Party Whips sometimes do not get an opportunity to do things, so well done to her for making time for this, even though

[Jim Shannon]

she does not have much time. I congratulate the hon. Lady in all her endeavours in supporting this subject matter. Even among the Government, there is sympathy, compassion and understanding of why this matter is so important, because every one of us deals with these issues every day of the week.

The most recent statistics show that there are some 5.7 million unpaid carers across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. That represents around 9% of the population, so industrious elected representatives, which we all are, will deal with those people every day of their week and understand the circumstances. They will also understand the commitment and time that those people give voluntarily, without any idea of what it will cost them—they just do it because, as the story the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) told shows, they love the people they care for. That is surely what it is all about. Their work and determination to care for a loved one does not go unnoticed, and it is extremely important that we do all we can to support them.

The pending Employment Rights Bill sets out the case for paid carer's leave for Northern Ireland. The stats back home are quite worrying—I think they are similar to those in Wales, although the hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) said that they are probably higher. One in three people in Northern Ireland have had to give up employment because of their caring responsibilities. Shockingly, 44% of carers in Northern Ireland have lost out on as much as £1,000 a month in wages due to leaving work or reducing their hours.

The hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) told the story of Sarah. He said that it was not unique, and it is not—it is a story that is replicated every day in my constituency and, I believe, in the constituency of every Member who is here and of every Member who is not here. Every week in my office I meet those volunteers—those family members—who give their all. Their commitment drains them emotionally and physically. Sometimes, when it comes to filling out benefit forms, I see the difficulties that they have and I sometimes wonder how on earth they are able to look after anybody with all their complex health issues.

The hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) is no longer in his place, but he mentioned young carers. I know that that has been one of his passions in this Chamber. It is also something that I deal with, although maybe not as much as I used to—I have a girl in the office now who does almost all the DWP and benefit issues. She tells me that young carers are often not acknowledged in the way that they should be. They do it because they love their mums and dads—that is what it is all about.

Carers UK has estimated that providing five days of fully paid carer's leave for employees in Northern Ireland could cost the Northern Ireland Executive between £10.3 million and £15.2 million a year. However, that could still save the Northern Ireland Executive some £4.3 million a year in carer's allowance payments. What carers do, and the cost factor for them, can never be overstated. In terms of that large cost to the Executive, there is a give and take. There is no doubt that that could be a beneficial step to take to support those with caring responsibilities.

The whole thrust of this debate, put forward by the hon. Member for North East Fife, is about how we can help carers the most. We all like the Minister, not just because of his role, but because he is always amenable and personable when we propose things to him, and I hope that he can give us and our constituents some encouragement.

A crucial point is that the proposed PIP changes will impact those who receive carer's allowance. If a claimant no longer qualifies for the daily living component when the new guidelines come into force, they will also lose their direct access to carer's allowance. That loss could be as much as £10,000, and will change the whole scenario for the carer and the family—the impact will be incredible.

I know what the Government are doing, but they have to look at things and make some changes. My fear has always been that the people they will hurt the most will be the people who can least accept it. I am interested in hearing the Minister's thoughts on what benefits the proposed changes to PIP will bring about. Those who will suffer will be not only PIP claimants, but carers and, ultimately, families.

We must do better for our constituents who sacrifice to help others. As a representative for Strangford, in Northern Ireland, I know the impact on my constituency and right across the Province, where there is currently no carer's leave legislation. I look to the Minister in a beseeching way, and because, as a Minister, he has all the answers—so no pressure at all—on the matters on which we need some succour and support. I hope he will engage with his counterparts back home in the Northern Ireland Assembly and with Government colleagues to discuss what more can be done to support our carers. That is why we are here: to support our constituents and do our best for them. If that is something that we can do better after today, this will have been a debate well worth having.

5.2 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Stringer. It is also a great pleasure to speak on behalf of the Liberal Democrats in this debate, given that it has been secured by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain). I thank her not only for securing the debate, but for all the work that she has done on this issue over a number of years. We are all grateful to her.

Listening to hon. Members' contributions, I was struck by the thought that we have represented all the countries of the United Kingdom—from Scotland to England, Wales and Northern Ireland. That makes it clear that this issue is of national importance, but it is also a very personal and specific problem, which many millions of individuals are dealing with in every constituency throughout the country.

I think of my Mid Sussex constituent Fe, whom I met a few weeks ago. She is probably about my age, and has basically been a carer for the past 20 years—first for her mother, who sadly passed away, and now for her father, who has recently gone into a care home. Because of that 20 years of caring she has often been unable to work, and has at times been in employment that does not reflect her qualifications or the complexity of the work that she can do.

Effectively, Fe has been impoverished by caring for her mother, and now her father. Now that her father is in a care home, the family home—her home—has had to be put on the market. When it is sold, Fe will find herself homeless. The hope is that there might be some money left over from the care home fees, but that may not be the case. Fe is looking at a bleak future: she has not paid into a pension and has been unable to build up a nest egg to look after her future after a lifetime of caring for others.

Despite the enormous contribution that they make, unpaid carers like Fe live in financial hardship. As other hon. Members have said, the carer's allowance, which is the main form of Government support, is just £81.90 a week—the lowest level for a benefit of its kind. That is not just unfair; it is also unsustainable. As our population ages and more people live longer with more complex needs, demand is only going to grow. How can we expect people like Fe to keep caring if they are pushed to the brink financially, emotionally and professionally? I do not see how we can. Worst of all, many carers have been punished for simply trying to make ends meet. As everyone here is probably aware, if a carer earns just £1 over the threshold of £150 a week they lose their entire carer's allowance.

Sarah Dyke: My hon. Friend was probably going on to say that most carers have no idea that they have accidentally been overpaid carer's allowance. Unpaid carers are doing such a remarkable job. I have been contacted by many in Glastonbury and Somerton who deserve our support. They are facing extreme financial hardship. Does she agree that we need to stop pursuing carers for old overpayments of carer's allowance?

Alison Bennett: I thank my hon. Friend for that powerful intervention. I absolutely agree that there should be an amnesty on those overpayments. They were accrued through no fault on the part of the people who received carer's allowance. It came about through a failure of the Government, the Department for Work and Pensions and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to communicate with each other, convey information and follow up on debts as they accrued.

This is a scandal. Many of those carers had no idea they were being overpaid. That is why I and Lib Dem colleagues are fighting for a better deal. In our manifesto, we pledged to increase the carer's allowance by £20 a week, which would have raised it to £101.90—an extra £1,040 a year. We would also raise the earnings threshold to £183 a week, in line with 16 hours on the minimum wage. Crucially, we would taper the allowance gradually, instead of cutting it off entirely. That is fair, and means that carers will not be penalised for working a few extra hours to support themselves.

Our vision for carers goes beyond financial support. We would introduce a statutory guarantee of regular respite breaks, because everyone needs time to rest, including carers. Many local councils already offer a respite service, but they have been stretched and pushed to the brink. Those councils do not have the resources to meet the demand for something so vital. We would make it a legal right to support respite care by introducing free personal care and pushing for long-term sustainable funding for social care, which is something I would like to see the Government act much faster on.

We must support carers because they are frankly being let down. My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I would introduce paid carer's leave, building on the Carer's Leave Act 2023. The coming into force of that landmark law means that 2 million carers have the right to take unpaid leave. Our next step is to make that paid leave, because caring for a loved one should not come at the cost of someone losing their job or income. All of that is rooted in one simple belief: no one should have to choose between caring for a loved one and having a decent life of their own.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I note that I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on carers. A lot of employers are already going further than the statutory requirement, in offering some days of paid leave. Members of Employers for Carers have found it has helped with retention of workers. Does she agree that some leading employers are already showing the benefits of providing paid carer's leave on a voluntary basis?

Alison Bennett: I thank the hon. Member for that question. I agree there are some exemplar employers who lead the way. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, the benefits to the economy of offering paid leave outweigh the potential costs.

Carers are more likely to be women, more likely to be middle-aged and more likely to be juggling children and caring responsibilities. They are that sandwich generation. One in seven people in the workplace are doing just that. They deserve real action and real support. I say to every unpaid carer listening today that, whether they realise it or not, they are pillars of our society. We, here and everywhere else, must recognise that. Carers, we see you and value you; the Liberal Democrats are on your side.

5.9 pm

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) on securing this important debate.

On behalf of His Majesty's official Opposition, I too want to underscore the indispensable role of unpaid carers in our society and highlight the pressing need to protect and enhance carer's leave. Such individuals, often family members or friends, provide vital support to those with long-term care needs, enabling them to live with dignity and independence. Unpaid carers, as others have said in this debate, are the backbone of our social care system. Their contributions are not only compassionate but economically significant—estimates suggest that unpaid care in England and Wales alone is valued at approximately £162 billion annually. Without their dedication, our health and social care services would face insurmountable challenges.

Moreover, many carers balance their responsibilities with some employment. The ability to take carer's leave is crucial to helping them maintain that balance, reducing the risk of financial hardship and social isolation. The last Conservative Government recognised the vital role of carers, but first I want to pay tribute to the private Member's Bill—now the Carer's Leave Act 2023—in the name of the hon. Member for North East Fife. I think that all of us who have had private Members' Bills know how difficult it is to navigate the various systems and to secure the Government of the day's support in

[Greg Smith]

order to get those Bills through. I am pleased to say that, under the last Conservative Government, the hon. Lady persuaded the Government to support her Bill, and we now see it on the statute book. It was enacted in April 2024, granting employees the right to one week of unpaid leave annually to care for dependants with long-term needs. That was a landmark achievement, providing carers with much-needed flexibility and acknowledging their invaluable contributions.

Furthermore, under the last Government we increased the earnings threshold for carer's allowance from £151 to £196 a week, enabling carers to earn more without losing benefits. That change enabled carers to work up to 16 hours a week at the national living wage, offering greater financial stability. Regrettably, this new Labour Government appear to be undermining those advancements. Recent welfare reforms have led to significant cuts in disability benefits, with over 150,000 carers losing access to carer's allowance. Those cuts not only jeopardise the financial security of carers, but risk increasing pressure on our already strained health and social care system.

While the Labour Government have introduced the Employment Rights Bill—or the unemployment Bill—it notably lacks provision for paid carer's leave. The omission is a missed opportunity to further support carers, particularly those on low incomes who may struggle to afford unpaid leave. To truly support them, the Government must take note of the foundations laid by the Carer's Leave Act by continuing the introduction of paid carer's leave, providing greater flexibility in how leave can be taken and ensuring that carers are not financially penalised for their invaluable contributions.

Additionally, the Government must do more to ensure that any welfare reforms do not disproportionately impact carers. Their wellbeing is intrinsically linked to the health of those they care for, and by extension, to the wellbeing of our society as a whole. Carers are the unsung heroes of our communities. They deserve our recognition, support, and commitment to policies that will empower them. It is incumbent on the Government to protect and enhance carer's leave, ensuring that they can continue their vital work without undue hardship.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Minister, if you can, please leave time for the proposer to wind up. I have no idea if we are going to have a Division, but it might be wise if we can finish before 5.30 pm.

5.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): I will do my best, Mr Stringer. No doubt the tension of knowing there might be an interruption will add to the excitement of my comments. It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I declare an interest as a foster carer. We are not specifically talking about foster care, but it is part of the wider ambit of care. I congratulate the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) on securing today's debate and on her very long-standing and successful advocacy for unpaid carers. We all recognise the key role she played in establishing the unpaid carer's entitlement through her sponsorship of the Carer's Leave Act 2023.

It is right that we take time to discuss the support available to unpaid carers who provide care to a family member, partner or friend alongside paid work. I accept the hon. Member's analysis that her Act, while an important step forward, is not a panacea for all the issues that carers face. A number of hon. Members have emphasised that point.

I start by recognising the dedication and compassion of carers across the country. It is important to recognise their contribution to society, both in their working life and as carers, but we also need to consider the support they need to navigate their dual responsibilities. I join the hon. Member in paying tribute to the support groups available to carers. Their role is often understated, but that wider network has a very important part to play for carers.

As we have heard, carers all too often end up stopping work altogether, or they reduce their hours to manage their caring responsibilities. Just half of adult carers are in work, and a quarter are economically inactive. The hon. Lady mentioned the Centre for Care's research report, which I will certainly look at.

We have heard about a considerable number of challenges today, which demonstrates why it is essential that we think about how we support carers to balance those responsibilities alongside other aspects of their life, including, of course, work. The hon. Lady recognised that we are improving access to flexible working through our landmark Employment Rights Bill. We believe that will help people to balance their work and other responsibilities, including their family life, such as where an individual is working alongside delivering care to a loved one inside or outside the home.

The hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) spoke very movingly about his constituent Sarah. I do not think her experience is unique, and we all recognise that there are people like Sarah in every constituency and every part of this country. The hon. Gentleman also mentioned carer's allowance, and I will pull up the shadow Minister on what he said about the increase in carer's allowance, as it actually came into effect on 7 April 2025. This Government increased the earnings limit from £151 a week to £196 a week, so it is equivalent to 16 hours a week at the national living wage. It is the largest ever increase in the earnings limit since carer's allowance was introduced back in 1976, and the highest increase in percentage terms since 2001.

That means carers can now earn up to £10,000 a year while retaining their carer's allowance, which can be worth around an additional £2,000 a year. As a result, more than 60,000 additional people will be able to receive carer's allowance between this year and 2029-30.

Several hon. Members referred to the difficulties their constituents have had after receiving an overpayment, and it is fair to say that issue has been recognised by the Department for Work and Pensions. We understand the anxiety it causes, which is why it is important that we independently review what has happened and find out what went wrong to make sure that things are put right. We urge anyone in receipt of carer's allowance to inform the Department of any change in their circumstances so that overpayments can be reviewed. It is certainly something that the Department will be advised of following this debate.

Employees caring for someone who is disabled, elderly or living with a long-term health condition are entitled to carer's leave, which can be taken flexibly in half or whole days, or in one go, over the course of a year. Thanks to the hon. Member for North East Fife, the Carer's Leave Act has now been in force for just over a year. It is still bedding in, and our plan to make work pay includes a commitment to review its implementation. To deliver that commitment, the post-implementation review of the Act is now under way.

We have also outlined our commitment to explore the potential benefits of further policy development to support unpaid carers in employment, while being mindful of the impact on business. That work will include careful consideration of paid carer's leave, and again, work is under way. Officials in my Department have spoken to over 70 employers, third sector organisations and charities such as Carers UK. There have been events in Wales, England and Scotland, and that engagement will continue as the review progresses, alongside both qualitative and quantitative research.

Anna Dixon: I thank the Minister for his commitment to review carer's leave and to consider the opportunity for looking at paid carer's leave. Does he agree that would particularly benefit low-income workers and women? They make up the bulk of unpaid carers, and they find it particularly difficult to take unpaid carer's leave because they simply cannot afford it.

Justin Madders: That point has been mentioned a number of times in this debate, and we will certainly look at the research as it is produced.

I have noted that the shadow Minister now supports paid carer's leave, although he could not bring himself to support it during the passage of the Employment Rights Bill. I am aware that there has been some debate on the issue in the other place, and we will look very carefully at how that debate unfolds.

It is important that we take the time to carefully consider the potential impact of any further policy before taking any decisions. As the hon. Member for North East Fife said, we often receive responses on the 2023 Act's application from organisations that are engaged on this issue. I pay tribute to those organisations, and some are clearly leading the way. An important point was made that, even in organisations that are very supportive of carer's leave and have all the policies in place, people sometimes do not get any further if they have the wrong line manager. That applies to a number of similar entitlements, so more work is needed.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) mentioned, we need to ensure that any decisions we make are grounded in evidence. There are several potential approaches to further support, including paid carer's leave, and we will continue to consider those with external stakeholders. It is important to note that careful design is needed where leave entitlements have a pay entitlement attached. Thought must be given not only to the impact on carers and businesses but to how any such paid entitlement would interact with existing legislation and rights.

The hon. Member for North East Fife asked a number of important questions about the Department's role in informing employers and carers of their new rights. Obviously, gov.uk is one source, but other organisations

and charities that we work with, such as Carers UK and the Carers Trust, are also sources of information. There are also carers' networks, employers and bodies such as ACAS and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. As part of our stakeholder engagement in business roundtables, we are considering what further work we can do to promote information on carers' rights. I am a strong believer that rights are only as good as people's awareness and ability to enforce them.

We are engaging with carers and businesses. We are working with advocacy groups such as Carers UK and the Centre for Care, and we are working across Government to provide a coherent approach. There is now a ministerial working group on unpaid carers, involving the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education, and it is discussing a cross-governmental approach.

Turning to the broader dimensions of the debate, the hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) spoke with great sincerity about the issues faced by his constituents. The themes that he picked out in relation to his constituents, and to Wales more broadly, about awareness of those rights and whether people can afford to exercise them, were important and are replicated across the UK.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke with his customary sincerity—I do not say that just because he was pleasant about me—and conveyed the importance of carers in his constituency and across Northern Ireland. I commit to speaking to my counterpart in the Northern Ireland Executive about some of the points he raised.

I am conscious that there may be Divisions shortly and that I need to give the hon. Member for North East Fife an opportunity to respond, so I conclude by saying that we have heard the case that Members have made about the importance of supporting carers and their need to balance paid work against their caring responsibilities. All the issues raised are being considered in the Department's ongoing work.

I genuinely value the heartfelt and constructive discussion we have had this afternoon. We all agree that unpaid carers deserve our recognition and support, and I am glad to see Members coming together to express that. I once again thank the hon. Member for securing this debate, and I am sure we will continue this discussion.

5.26 pm

Wendy Chamberlain: I start by thanking all the Members who have taken time to participate in the debate. There are several Liberal Democrats present, which says a lot about the position my party takes on carers and the recognition it gives to unpaid carers, for which I am grateful. I also thank the Department for Business and Trade and the civil servants who supported me during the passage of my private Member's Bill, now the Carer's Leave Act 2023, in the last Parliament—they did excellent work. The real purpose of this debate is to ensure that excellent work is not lost and is seen by the people who need the help and support.

I am encouraged by the response from His Majesty's Opposition and their approach to paid carer's leave, and by what the Government are saying. However, I am very conscious that if we are moving forward on paid carer's leave, we need to make sure that the current

[Wendy Chamberlain]

carer's leave legislation is available to as many people as possible. I am also encouraged to hear from the Minister that there is a ministerial working group on unpaid carers. The last time I discussed carers on the Floor of the House it was to ask for a carer's strategy; it sounds like the working group might be the beginning of one, which I am pleased to hear. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett), our carers spokesperson, will be following up on that with the Minister and the Government.

We all recognise what unpaid carers do, and we all recognise how much they do. What we are saying is that, if we really want to see growth—which is what the Government say they want, and everyone in the Chamber

would agree—then we need to allow those carers who can work, to work. There will always be circumstances where unpaid carers cannot work because of the severity of the condition that their loved one is experiencing. My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) brought one of those cases to light. But where carers can work, they should be given the opportunity and support to do so, because economic inactivity is causing real issues in our economy. That is why carer's leave is an issue that all MPs should care about.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered carer's leave.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 14 May 2025

CABINET OFFICE

Places for Growth 2030

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): Today the Government have announced further steps that they are taking to transform the civil service through:

Building on the places for growth programme by bringing more decision making out of Whitehall and closer to communities, ensuring that 50% of UK-based senior civil servants are located outside London in the English regions, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland by 2030.

Strengthening the Government presence across the country, with 13 cross-Government regional hubs. These hubs will have end-to-end careers across the civil service, allowing promotion without having to relocate, and foster collaboration across organisations and all spheres of Government, with talent feeding in from regional “spokes.”

Bringing central and local government together in place to work differently, launching “test and learn” pilots to trial multidisciplinary teams across Government, strengthening local partnerships, bringing policy closer to delivery, driving public sector reform and prioritising preventive interventions.

Becoming more productive and agile by reducing the London workforce, delivering admin savings by closing 11 buildings in this SR, including two core buildings, including the specific building closures of 102 Petty France and 39 Victoria Street.

Strengthening the talent pipeline: Building a long-term pipeline of talent across the country, including by:

Launching a new apprenticeship programme—OS career launch apprenticeship, which will support entry into the civil service in Birmingham and Manchester (as well as London).

Setting an ambition to have 50% of fast stream roles based outside London by 2030. This would strengthen regional talent and support the ambition to bring the civil service closer to the communities it serves.

Committing to develop and launch a local government interchange programme, in partnership with the Local Government Association. Working with the LGA to develop secondment programmes focused on working with local government.

As part of the Prime Minister’s plan for change, it is essential that the civil service evolves to become more agile, closer to the communities it serves, and more efficient to deliver savings for our taxpayers. At the heart of this agenda is the places for growth programme, which will support the delivery of civil service transformation.

By 2030, our vision is for the UK Government to be embedded in every region, supporting local economic growth and collaborating on Government-led missions. High-quality Government roles will move from London to bolster a stronger and more senior presence, delivering for all citizens across the English regions, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Aligned with the wider reform agenda, the civil service will reshape as it resizes to be more effective and efficient, enabling diverse, cross-Government career paths across the country while being closer to the communities it serves.

Building on the success of the Darlington economic campus, the Sheffield policy campus and the Leeds health and social care hub, we want to explore opportunities for more campuses to create strategic partnerships between central and local government as well as industry partners, taking multidisciplinary approaches to complex issues and making the most of each region’s strengths across the country. Two of the new campuses will be a new Government digital and an AI innovation campus and energy campus, to be launched in Manchester and Aberdeen.

[HCW633]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Transnational Repression Review

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): In response to global reports of incidents of transnational repression (TNR), the defending democracy taskforce has conducted a review into the UK’s response to this phenomenon, focusing on building our understanding of the scale, nature, and impact domestically, as well as making recommendations to strengthen that response. The review—completed in partnership with lead Government Departments, the police and the intelligence services, alongside engagement with victims of TNR—represents a comprehensive deep dive into the issue. This review has recently concluded and in my capacity as taskforce chair, as well as Security Minister, I am updating the House on the UK’s approach to TNR.

The UK recognise TNR as a term to describe certain foreign state-directed crimes against individuals. This activity can take place both physically or online, with examples including intimidation, surveillance, harassment, forced/coerced return, abduction and even assassination at the most serious end of the scale.

Recent instances of conduct described as TNR in the UK include: the targeting of Iran International in 2023; Hong Kong authorities targeting individuals for exercising their right to freedom of expression by issuing bounties under their National Security Law; and the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury in 2018.

The review has found that TNR in the UK tends to be targeted and specific, where perpetrating states particularly focus on individuals whom they perceive as threats or otherwise seek to control, such as vocal critics, dissidents, or activists opposed to their regime. While TNR does not affect large numbers of people across the UK, its impacts can be severe, not only for those directly targeted but also for wider communities, where fear and concern may spread.

The UK’s response to tackling state-directed threats is world leading and our approach has matured considerably, even since the review’s inception. The review has found that the UK has the appropriate tools and system-wide safeguards in place to robustly counter this threat. While we maintain a hard operating environment for those states wishing to conduct TNR, the review makes several recommendations to strengthen the UK’s response even further.

States conducting TNR in the UK cannot act with impunity. The National Security Act attained Royal Assent in December 2023, and this pioneering legislation introduced new and updated powers and offences to ensure that the UK has the tools necessary to disrupt and deter all forms of malign foreign interference, including transnational repression.

The review has examined the work being conducted by the police and intelligence services in relation to TNR and the support provided to those under threat. It has concluded that the continued implementation of, and enforcement in relation to, the National Security Act is of paramount importance if the UK is to remain a challenging operating environment for foreign states looking to control and influence those who oppose them. As the new legislation builds on existing laws and effective practice, police and intelligence services have mature mechanisms in place to continually assess potential threats in the UK. As a result, police and intelligence services take a proactive approach to countering the most acute forms of state-directed threats to individuals, using a wide range of tactics to protect those identified as at risk.

Alongside our comprehensive statutory list of offences, measures and powers, the review has found that the UK has a suite of further tools to hold states accountable. For example, when alerted to instances of TNR, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office deploys the most appropriate diplomatic measures, both publicly and privately, to raise the cost to foreign states of carrying out interference activity. Furthermore, we work closely with likeminded partners through both bilateral and multilateral channels, including the G7 rapid response mechanism and UN, to raise awareness and build our collective resilience to this threat. For example, in June 2024 the UK signed up to a joint statement on TNR at the UN Human Rights Council. This statement outlined our joint understanding on TNR and commitment to tackle this threat together.

In conjunction with the TNR review team, and as I set out in my statement on Iranian state threats on 4 March 2025, the College of Policing has launched training and guidance which is now available for all 45 territorial police forces in the UK. This will enhance the ability of front-line police officers and staff in the identification of state-directed crimes and the actions that can be taken to escalate and mitigate this activity. This training will assist the police as they provide support to those affected by state threats activity and keep people safe. I have recently written to chief constables to emphasise the importance of this training, as increased recognition of state-directed crimes will strengthen our ability to shape our response based on threat.

The review team has also carefully considered how best to encourage reporting and ensure that reports received are treated seriously and dealt with appropriately. In consultation with Counter Terrorism Policing, the review has found that existing mechanisms—999, 101, or at a local police station—together with the new foreign interference training package, are the most effective ways to report state directed crimes and will ensure victims receive the support and protection they need. I appreciate that this is a highly sensitive matter, and there may be some reluctance to report experiences. However, it is crucial for anyone who believes they are a victim of state-directed crimes to report their

concerns to the police; reports will be handled sensitively, taken seriously and investigated swiftly in line with UK law.

The UK maintains a hard operating environment for those states wishing to conduct TNR. However, the review makes several recommendations to strengthen the UK's response even further. Today, I am publishing a guidance page on gov.uk providing those who believe themselves to be at risk of TNR with practical advice for their safety both physically and online. This guidance will complement the work of the police and intelligence services in operationalising relevant powers, including under the National Security Act, and will enable this Government to expand our collaboration with international partners to share information and co-ordinate responses.

The full detail of the review's recommendations will no doubt be of great interest to states known to perpetrate TNR, so neither the recommendations nor the review itself will be made publicly available. Furthermore, given the sensitive nature of this topic and to preserve the integrity of security arrangements, we will not routinely comment on specific allegations. I would, however, refer to the public statements made by Ken McCallum, the director general of MI5, concerning the complex and interconnected threat environment, including the threats posed by authoritarian regimes whose repression at home increasingly extends to aggression overseas. The review recommends that the UK's tools and approach remain agile in response to this changing threat environment.

Instances of TNR are a threat to our national security and sovereignty, and seek to undermine the principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. This is unacceptable and will not be tolerated, irrespective of the perpetrating country.

Let me reiterate that acts of TNR tend to be targeted and specific; I encourage people to exercise alertness, but crucially they should not live in fear. It is this Government's priority to ensure the safety and security of those who live here. I am pleased that this comprehensive review has found that the UK has a robust system in place to ensure the protection of the public and has made proportionate recommendations to strengthen our approach further. I would stress again that anyone who believes that they are a victim of a crime directed by a foreign state should contact the police to report their concerns.

The UK will continue to ensure the systems in place to detect, deter and counter transnational repression are robust in keeping people safe.

[HCWS632]

JUSTICE

Prison Capacity

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): This Government inherited a prison system at the point of crisis. We took swift and decisive action to stabilise it, but we knew that was a first step. This is why, in October, I appointed the right hon. David Gauke to lead an independent review of sentencing. I expect the sentencing review to provide recommendations to place the system on a sustainable footing and ensure there is always space in prison for dangerous offenders.

Last December we published a long-term prison capacity strategy, setting out plans to build 14,000 prison places by 2031. This is the largest expansion of the prison estate since the Victorians. We have already committed £2.3 billion to prison expansion. Since taking office, we have opened 2,400 new prison places. While the spending review is ongoing, I can announce today that the Treasury will fund our prison expansion plans, in full, across the spending review period.

I have been clear that it was likely that further measures would be required before the sentencing review's long-term recommendations could be implemented. Under central demand projections, the adult male estate will have capacity of just 200 prison places remaining by the end of September 2025 and will hit zero capacity—entirely run out of prison places—by November 2025.

It is therefore essential that we act now to avert a further crisis in prison capacity and manage the system over the shorter term while long-term reforms are delivered. The alternative would be the total breakdown of law and order, and the end to our ambitions of meeting our safer streets mission.

The recall population has more than doubled since 2018 from 6,000 to 13,600 prisoners in March this year. Last year I was clear that sustained action on recall was needed. The Government will bring forward legislation in the coming weeks to make more use of fixed-term recall, mandating it for sentences of less than four years. We will exclude offenders recalled for committing a serious further offence and offenders who are subject to higher levels of risk management by multi-agency public protection arrangements. This measure builds on previous legislation that mandated 14-day recalls for those serving sentences of less than a year. The proposals will ensure we do not run out of prison places before we introduce

the sentencing reforms that—alongside our record prison building plans—will end the crisis in our prisons for good.

[HCWS634]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Contingencies Fund Advance

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): I would like to notify the House that the Department for Work and Pensions has obtained approval for an advance from the Contingencies Fund of £4,500,000. This will enable the Department to start building an IT solution, for the delivery of the eligibility verification measure, from May 2025 onwards, before the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill, which includes this measure, receives Royal Assent.

Funding for this measure was included in the 2024 spending review. It is expected to generate £940 million in savings over five years to 2029-30. Expenditure before Royal Assent will help to ensure the timely delivery of these savings.

Parliamentary approval for capital of £4,500,000 for this new service will be sought in a main estimate for the Department for Work and Pensions. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £4,500,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

The advance will be repaid at the earliest opportunity following Royal Assent of the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill.

[HCWS631]

Written Corrections

Wednesday 14 May 2025

Other Correction

CARLA DENYER

UK-EU Summit

The following extract is from the Opposition day debate on 13 May 2025 on the UK-EU summit.

Carla Denyer: The Minister raises the important issue of the cost of living. Given the dire economic impacts of Brexit, including food inflation being eight times higher than it would otherwise have been, and the costs of leaving the European Union amounting to £1 million an hour in 2022, according to data from the

Office for National Statistics, does he agree with me that it makes total economic sense for the UK and the people in it to use next week's summit to start discussions with the EU on what the process of rejoining might be, and the timings for that?

[*Official Report*, 13 May 2025; Vol. 767, c. 237.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Bristol Central (Carla Denyer):

Carla Denyer: The Minister raises the important issue of the cost of living. Given the dire economic impacts of Brexit, including food inflation being 8 **percentage points** higher than it would otherwise have been, and the costs of leaving the European Union amounting to £1 million an hour in 2022, according to data from the Office for National Statistics, does he agree with me that it makes total economic sense for the UK and the people in it to use next week's summit to start discussions with the EU on what the process of rejoining might be, and the timings for that?

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Wednesday 21 May 2025**

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