

**Monday
14 September 2026**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Monday 14 September 2026

The following abbreviations are used to show a Member's party affiliation:

Abbreviation	Affiliation
Alliance	Alliance Party of Northern Ireland
Con	Conservative Party
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
Green	Green Party of England and Wales
Ind	Independent*
Lab	Labour Party
Lab/Co-op	Labour and Co-operative Party
LD	Liberal Democrat
PC	Plaid Cymru
Reform	Reform UK
SDLP	Social Democratic and Labour Party
SNP	Scottish National Party
TUV	Traditional Unionist Voice
UUP	Ulster Unionist Party

*The term “Independent” may denote—

Members who have been elected as Independent candidates without affiliation to a political party; or

Members who have been elected after standing for a political party but no longer have the party Whip in the House of Commons.

House of Commons

Monday 14 September 2026

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

ELECTORAL COMMISSIONERS

The VICE-CHAMBERLAIN OF THE HOUSEHOLD reported to the House, That His Majesty, having been attended with its Address of 21st April, was pleased to receive the same very graciously and give the following Answer:

I have received your Humble Address praying that I should appoint Mr Alan Mabbutt OBE as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 1 May 2026 for the period ending 30 April 2030. I will comply with your request.

NATIONAL AUDIT OFFICE

The VICE-CHAMBERLAIN OF THE HOUSEHOLD reported to the House, That His Majesty, having been attended with its Address of 2nd July, was pleased to receive the same very graciously and give the following Answer:

I have received your Humble Address praying that I should appoint Michael Jary CBE to the office of Chair of the National Audit Office from 10 January 2027. I will comply with your request.

INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY

The VICE-CHAMBERLAIN OF THE HOUSEHOLD reported to the House, That His Majesty, having been attended with its Address of 13th July, was pleased to receive the same very graciously and give the following Answer:

I have received your Humble Address praying that I should appoint Richard Lloyd OBE to the office of Chair of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority with effect from 1 September 2026 for the period ending 31 August 2029. I will comply with your request.

ELECTORAL COMMISSIONERS

The VICE-CHAMBERLAIN OF THE HOUSEHOLD reported to the House, That His Majesty, having been attended with its Address of 13th July, was pleased to receive the same very graciously and give the following Answer:

I have received your Humble Address praying that I should appoint Hywel Williams as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 1 October 2026 for the period ending 30 September 2029; that I should re-appoint Chris Ruane as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 1 November 2026 for the period ending 31 October 2030; and that I should re-appoint Sheila Ritchie as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 1 February 2027 for the period ending 31 January 2031. I will comply with your request.

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: I offer my condolences to the Prime Minister on the death of his father. I am sure that the whole House will want to send our best wishes to him and his family at this sad time.

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Student Loans

1. **Tessa Munt** (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): What steps she is taking to improve the student loan system. [901324]

The Secretary of State for Education (Lucy Powell): May I join in what you said, Mr Speaker? I am sure that the whole House will want to send our deepest condolences to the Prime Minister and to his wonderful mum Eileen, his brothers Nick and John, all the grandchildren and the whole family on this saddest of days.

The student loans system we inherited is broken and unfair, and some graduates feel the weight of it more strongly. Going to university remains a fantastic opportunity, but I have been very clear that this issue is at the top of my in-tray, and I have been very clear in my views about it.

Tessa Munt: I associate myself with the comments of the Secretary of State. I am sure that all of us on the Liberal Democrat Benches feel deeply sad for the Prime Minister.

Tuition fees continue to rise, while the plan 2 repayment threshold stays frozen until 2030. If it is frozen until 2031, it will align with the minimum wage, leaving students facing higher premiums for up to 40 years. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are hit by sky-high rents and living costs and face a brutal job market. Young constituents tell me that they cannot trust the fees system when a change of Government can mean a change to the terms of their loans. Will the Secretary of State commit to uprating the thresholds, restoring maintenance grants and creating an independent watchdog so that Governments cannot keep moving the goalposts?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Lady has put that really well. I reassure her that we absolutely keep these things under review. I have said that this issue is at the top of my in-tray, and that remains the case. I am acutely aware of the cost of living pressures that many graduates in their 20s and early 30s are under, particularly those on plan 2, and that is affecting their decisions about work and life. That is why I will continue to push at this issue, and I hope to have more to say soon.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): May I, too, pass on my condolences to the Prime Minister and his family?

I declare that I am a plan 2 borrower, and I know from first-hand experience how unclear the loans were at the time. Will my right hon. Friend say a little more about how the Government are clearing up the guidance given to borrowers? How does she wish to overhaul the Student Loans Company?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for all his campaigning on this issue, which I have followed closely. He is absolutely right, and in response to the excellent report of the Treasury Committee, we have committed to much clearer guidance for students before they make decisions about going to university,

so that they can be much clearer about how the student loan system will work and possibly affect them in future. That is a really important piece of work. We have also capped the maximum interest rates this year, and we are reintroducing maintenance grants.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): I associate myself with the Secretary of State's remarks regarding the Prime Minister's father.

Despite the Secretary of State previously calling the student loan system "egregious" and saying that reviewing that system was a top priority—she has just said that it is at the top of her in-tray—the Treasury's response to the Treasury Committee rejected a series of recommendations that would have alleviated some of the burden on those on plan 2 student loans. What exactly is the Secretary of State's plan to fix the student loan system?

Lucy Powell: As I have said, I am determined that we get these things right. Two things can be true at the same time: I feel the system is unfair and in need of reform, but we also have to put that in the context of the wider public finances and all the pressures and priorities that fall on them. However, it is slightly audacious of the Conservatives to raise this issue, given that they introduced the plan 2 system and froze the threshold four times when they were in government—they are not independent campaigners on this issue today. It now falls in my lap to deal with this issue, and I will do so, unlike the Conservative party.

Young People not in Education, Employment or Training

2. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What steps she is taking to support young people not in education, employment or training. [901325]

6. **John Grady** (Glasgow East) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training. [901329]

The Secretary of State for Education (Lucy Powell): I thank Alan Milburn for his commitment to our young people. This is one of our country's biggest challenges, and I agree with him that education is "the faltering foundation". Our current system is leaving too many behind. Countries that combine high academic standards with quality technical education boast low NEET rates, which is why I am determined to make this country a technical education superpower.

Christine Jardine: I associate myself with your comments, Mr Speaker, and those of the Secretary of State.

Figures quoted today by the BBC suggest that as many as one in five young people in education may not be attending college courses regularly, so the situation may be even worse than outlined in the Milburn report. While I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to a fundamental encouragement of technical education, does she think we are approaching a crisis and that we need to rethink exactly what it is that will engage our young people in education, because they are not getting from it what they need to feel prepared for their future life? If so, how will she go about that?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I think she is one of the most frequent contributors to Education questions, as she was to business questions when I was Leader of the House, and I look forward to continuing to debate these issues with her. She is right that attendance, inclusion and—critically—engagement are pivotal to this issue, which is why we need to look not just at the curriculum and the new qualifications that young people can gain, but at ensuring they have the passport they need for life, and are engaged and want to go to school or college every day.

John Grady: Over the summer, I met many brilliant businesses in Glasgow East that are desperate and determined to give young people apprenticeships, opening the door to a lifetime of opportunities. However, many of them told me that they have to give young people basic training in maths to help them thrive in jobs such as plumbing, joinery and welding. They rightly think that schools in Glasgow and across Scotland should be teaching this. Does my right hon. Friend agree that much more needs to be done in Scotland to improve the teaching of maths in schools?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. Last week's PISA—programme for international student assessment—results show the importance of those foundations in English, maths and science, which we have really motored on in England over the course of a 25 or 30-year consensus. Scotland, however, is not doing so well. My hon. Friend will know that Scotland's education system used to be the envy of the world; that is not the case today, and I think it is about time that the Scottish Government took a leaf out of England's book.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for her commitment to this issue, and the hon. Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) for his focus on maths. On Friday, I visited Allerton Steel, a steel fabricator in Northallerton. That business does a great job of providing high-quality apprenticeships for young people every year, regardless of the cycle, and I was lucky to meet David, Oliver and Jacob—it was wonderful to see their passion and excitement about their futures. Will the Secretary of State join me in wishing them well, but also commend businesses such as Allerton Steel and the local companies up and down the country that are ultimately the ones providing these opportunities for our young people?

Lucy Powell: I am delighted to join the right hon. Gentleman in thanking Allerton Steel for all the work it does supporting young people in and around his constituency with apprenticeships. He is absolutely right. I held a summit last week at No. 10 North—I am sure he will want to visit at some point soon—with school, college and business leaders. There is a real sense of galvanising the whole business community, who are determined to play their part in tackling this issue.

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): Dorset Innovation Park is home to a number of defence firms that are looking to expand. However, too many young people right across South Dorset are unable to get the qualifications that these employers are looking for. Will the Minister work with Dorset council, Yeovil college and me to

establish a satellite college at the innovation park to give more young people that direct pathway into high-skilled, high-paid jobs?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for all the work he does in his constituency on these issues. He is absolutely right that we have to get opportunities to young people near where they live, working in partnership in the way that he describes. I am happy to meet him to discuss how we can get such opportunities into his constituency.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): The Government continue to point the finger at schools for the number of those not in education, employment or training, when that is one area that is performing comparatively well. Meanwhile, in Labour-led Wales, which ignored the Conservative Government's education reforms, school standards have fallen and the NEETs crisis is even worse than in England. Why are the Government blaming schools for NEETs when the bigger problem is the collapse of entry-level jobs for young people?

Lucy Powell: I say gently to the hon. Lady that we do not just have more than a million young people not in education, employment or training—most of whom were educated under the Conservatives—but 1.5 million students persistently absent from school; a stubborn disadvantage gap, which did not close on their watch; widening regional attainment gaps; and a special educational needs and disabilities crisis that we are having to deal with, which they did not. Perhaps more importantly, the Conservatives put our young people on a treadmill of resits, with failure after failure. Just this summer, less than 14% of our young people passed their resits in maths. That is the legacy that they left, and I will rectify it.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): May I send my condolences and those of everyone on the Liberal Democrat Benches to the Prime Minister on the death of his father?

Alan Milburn is clear that exposure to the workplace for teenagers is critical in helping them to secure employment when they leave education, yet we know that less than a third of year 13 students have completed work experience. The Government have said they are committed to more work placements, which is welcome. Instead of overhauling the school system, will the Secretary of State instead focus on working with the Chancellor and the Business Secretary to reverse the jobs tax and other policies that have made it increasingly difficult for businesses to offer either work experience or a traditional first job to young people?

Lucy Powell: I think we need to do all these things. Alan Milburn was clear that education was “the faltering foundation”. We are seeing too many young people leave school without the qualifications that they need to get either an apprenticeship or into work. That is why there are so many NEETs. We are seeing too many young people disengage from school much earlier on. This is all part of the NEETs crisis. Young people are not subject to national insurance contributions in the same way as older people, and neither are apprentices.

We have put in place a number of things, such as support for those wanting to take up an apprenticeship, including a £4,000 bursary. We are doing a huge amount at the other end, but we need to deal with the supply issue, too.

SEND: Cross-Government Work

3. **Jen Craft** (Thurrock) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to ensure a cross-Government approach to improve outcomes for children with SEND. [901326]

The Secretary of State for Education (Lucy Powell): It is me again, Mr Speaker. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] As a former Leader of the House, I feel under pressure to know exactly where I am on the Order Paper.

I thank my hon. Friend for all her work on special educational needs and disabilities. I listened closely to her speeches in the recent Health Bill debate. I assure her that these reforms are essential and that no one Department can do them alone. That is why we are working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care.

Jen Craft: I welcome the Secretary of State's kind words. Let me also associate myself with her remarks, and with yours, Mr Speaker, about the Prime Minister's very sad loss.

The Secretary of State mentioned last week's health debate, when I received a commitment to much greater accountability, via the education Bill, for the health sector in delivering the health element of the SEND system. What work has been done with her colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care in that regard?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for her doughty campaigning on these issues. She is right: as part of the SEND reforms, we must ensure that there is accountability throughout the system, in health as much as in education and other sectors. I assure my hon. Friend that we are working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care. I have spoken to the new Health Secretary about this issue a number of times, and I look forward to shaping the reforms with her in the coming weeks.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on her return to the Cabinet. The two main points that parents of children with SEND in my constituency would make to her in her new role concern the time that it takes for the education, health and care plans to be decided, and the number of specialist school places that are available both in Shropshire and in Telford and Wrekin. What plans has she to improve the position, and to intervene when local authorities are not performing?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising these issues so frequently. He is right: the current system is not working for parents, and it is not working for children. It is far too adversarial, there are too many delays, and parents often find that they cannot obtain the support that they want at the end of it. It is important to ensure that we have enough places, and we have already provided an extra £3.7 billion to support those extra places, but we also need to ensure that there are strong levers of accountability with local authorities and others. The hon. Gentleman can rest assured that we are looking at all those issues right now.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): Schools in my constituency, including Fairmeadows Foundation primary school, applied to Reform-led Derbyshire county council for capital funding for SEND provision within their mainstream settings. They were told that their application was successful in July 2025, and again in September that year. Funding was to come from a pot believed to be about £7 million, with an extra £500,000 mentioned on 10 September this year, but so far no funding has been released. I personally raised this matter with the council leader, Alan Graves, in June. When we chased the money again last week, we were told that the service-level agreements were still being worked on. Will the Minister please join me in calling on Derbyshire county council to get on with releasing these moneys?

Lucy Powell: I am very sorry to hear that the Reform-led council in Derbyshire is not following through quickly enough on its commitment to SEND families in the council area. We will, of course, pick that up. We are working closely with all local authorities on their SEND reform plans, and ensuring that they put them into action quickly.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Reform): Research from the Department for Education confirms that children who move schools frequently often suffer poor outcomes, particularly children with special educational needs. That is why a number of armed forces families—people on average incomes—choose independent education to minimise the disruption that results from their postings. May I ask the Secretary of State, with her new Education team, whether she will publish—perhaps jointly with the Ministry of Defence—research showing whether the introduction of VAT on school fees has led to an increase in the number of in-year moves, especially among service families?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Gentleman has rightly identified an issue. We are introducing new individual support plans, which will be national and digital so that they can move around with children. We obviously want to minimise the number of occasions on which students move to new schools and, in some instances, have their support reassessed when they get there. I do not believe that there has been a particular issue for children in armed forces families in relation to the VAT on private schools, but I am happy to look into that for the hon. Gentleman.

Curriculum and Assessment Review

4. **Caroline Voaden** (South Devon) (LD): What steps she is taking to implement the recommendations of the curriculum and assessment review. [901327]

The Secretary of State for Education (Lucy Powell): I thank the hon. Lady for all the work she does on the Education Committee.

Reforms to curriculum and assessment go hand in hand with our vision to ensure that education is a passport for work, life and success. Becky Francis did a fantastic job for us on the review, and we will soon publish proposals to go out to consultation that build on it. The proposals will ensure a broader and more inclusive education system, with fewer barriers to

progression, stronger technical and vocational options, more emphasis on oracy and more stepping-stone qualifications.

Caroline Voaden: The Government have committed to providing an enrichment entitlement for every child, including access to nature. Evidence shows that outdoor education can be part of the solution to some of the biggest issues facing our young people, such as the mental health and obesity crisis, the rise in NEETs and a failing SEND system. However, when a fifth of children in the most deprived parts of the country never spend meaningful time outdoors, something has to change. A framework for schools is not enough; we need a step change. Will the Secretary of State back my Outdoor Education Bill so that every child can grow up outdoors with better mental wellbeing, physical health, attainment, attendance and employability?

Lucy Powell: Again, I thank the hon. Lady for all the campaigning she has done on this and for bringing to this House a really important Bill so that we can debate these issues. I think those issues go wider than the school system. This is a bigger piece about what childhood means in the 21st century, and how we can all support children to be independent, to have success and good wellbeing, and to be happy. Playing and being outdoors are of course a critical part of that.

Callum Anderson (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): An important feature of the curriculum and assessment review was the recognition of and the commitment to strengthening financial literacy as a vital life skill for young people. To ensure we can deliver on that ambition, participating in the OECD's PISA financial literacy assessment will help us to both measure our progress and identify gaps in that progress. Can the Secretary of State set out what assessment she has made of the merits of UK participation in 2029, and will she meet me to discuss it?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and we have expressed an interest in taking part in the PISA financial literacy assessment in 2029. We recognise the importance of financial education for children and young people, which we will strengthen in the upcoming maths and citizenship curricula. I would be happy to meet with him to discuss how we can take that further.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for her Bill. I draw the Secretary of State's attention to the recent change of the law by the Scottish Parliament that entitles every young person at school to five days outdoors with four nights in residential accommodation, which brings massive benefits to their resilience, love of learning and capacity to work together in teams. Given that 81% of children from the poorest backgrounds never get access to outdoor education, is it not time that we considered doing something similar?

Lucy Powell: I am absolutely with the hon. Member on the importance of residential activities, and for every young person to have access to them. I am not sure if Ghyll Head is in his constituency—

Tim Farron indicated assent.

Lucy Powell: The hon. Member is nodding. I went to Ghyll Head as a child—it is owned by Manchester city council—and my children have been there. It is a fantastic facility, and my ambition is that every child has the opportunity to go somewhere as fantastic as that. I am happy to work with him on these issues.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): This summer, the Prime Minister set out his ambition for our education system:

“Whether you choose construction, coding or classics...Labour will build an education system where you’ll get the skills you need”.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on classics, I really welcome that. Will the Secretary of State set out her vision for the arts and humanities in our curriculum to ensure that more young people take up these subjects, which are so good at empowering them with skills?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend has already spoken to me a number of times about these issues, because he is a very good chair of the APPG on classics. I thank him for his question, and he is absolutely right. We have to recognise that the current offer in our education system has got narrower and narrower, and even bringing in measures such as the EBacc has not helped to preserve important subjects such as classics and computer science. In fact, they have fallen significantly since its introduction. I want to ensure that all our young people have access to these great academic subjects as well as to technical ones.

Mr Speaker: I welcome the new shadow Minister.

Patrick Spencer (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): Over the weekend, the Secretary of State backtracked on an interview she gave to *The Observer* where she said she wanted to reintroduce coursework. For the record, we were very pleased to hear that, but in the same interview she made a number of other commitments, including reducing the number of exams that children take at age 16 and introducing a GCSE in football coaching. Which of those commitments does she still stand by?

Lucy Powell: Oh dear, Mr Speaker—honestly! They had a go at it last week and it did not go very well, so they are having another go this week. If the hon. Gentleman can find where I said that I wanted to bring back coursework then he can bring it to me, because I did not say that. [*Interruption.*] No, I did not at all.

Mr Speaker: Order. Members can come in with their own questions. We do not need anything further.

Lucy Powell: I gave a 10-minute statement to the House last week and I answered questions for 90 minutes. I think that gave a very clear account of what I want to do. The Opposition want to defend their narrowing and narrowing of the curriculum without accepting responsibility for the effects of that. I do want to ensure that great subjects such as computing involve using a computer, because they took that out of the curriculum entirely. I want to ensure that PE involves some PE. Call me a radical, Mr Speaker, but I think that goes in hand in hand. I make no apology either for wanting to see oracy very much at the heart of our curriculum in

school. They send their kids to private school, where they all come out really confident in speaking. I want that for every child.

Apprenticeships

5. **Bradley Thomas** (Bromsgrove) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support apprenticeships. [901328]

Mr Speaker: I welcome the new Minister.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Paul Waugh): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Apprenticeships are the responsibility of the Department for Work and Pensions, but the Department for Education is supporting apprenticeships by introducing new technical and vocational pathways from 14 to 19 years, including new V-levels from 2027, new level 2 pathways and even more T-levels, from which young people can progress through apprenticeships and higher education. These new 14 to 19 qualifications will enable students to progress more easily and on to apprenticeships.

Bradley Thomas: I welcome the Minister to his place and congratulate him on his appointment. The Government are right to focus on the importance of parity between vocational education and academic education. However, when comparing the academic year 2025-26 with 2023-24, the number of people who have started apprenticeships has dropped by 9% and the number who have completed has gone down by 17%. With reference to the Minister's point about vocational pathways, will he update the House on what steps the Government are taking to ensure that they are linked with the needs of industry, so that this in itself does not become an academic exercise?

Paul Waugh: May I return those congratulations by congratulating the hon. Member on his elevation to the shadow Front Bench, and may I congratulate him, too, on the work he has done on vocational skills, including in his jobs fare in Bromsgrove? It is worth saying that V-levels are precisely designed to tally with what employers want. That is exactly why we are reforming the system to ensure every child will have the right technical education. More broadly, the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have said that the parity of esteem between vocational and academic education is exactly what everyone in this country wants.

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

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): May I put on record my condolences to the Prime Minister on the sad loss of his father?

The Education Committee strongly agrees with the Government's focus on expanding opportunities for apprenticeships and high-quality technical and vocational education across the country, but too often young people who want to pursue apprenticeships are left to do their own research across multiple different platforms with varying application timescales. Last year, the Education Committee recommended that to help young people understand the full range of opportunities available to them and provide parity of esteem, there should be a single point of access for information about apprenticeships alongside vocational, technical and academic courses.

Will the new Minister look again at that recommendation and seek to ensure young people wishing to do apprenticeships and vocational and technical courses are just as well supported as their peers who are applying for university?

Paul Waugh: I thank my hon. Friend for all the hard work the Education Committee has done on this topic. She is right that there should be parity of esteem, and the equivalent of a UCAS system for children who are going into technical education. Baroness Smith is looking at precisely that subject, and we aim to come up with some answers soon.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): You will recall, Mr Speaker—as will the Minister, from his earlier life—that when I was the Skills Minister, we had the biggest number of apprenticeships in modern history. I did that because I believe in elevating the practical, but, too often, careers advice and guidance delivered in schools drives people down an academic route to study degrees that have neither academic rigour nor economic value. Will the Minister look again at the advice and guidance given to people, so that aptitudes, talents and taste can be met by good-quality vocational and technical education?

Paul Waugh: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his hard work on this subject as the former Skills Minister. The House is in agreement on the issue. The Prime Minister rightly says that we should be focusing on problem solving rather than point scoring. Given that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned apprenticeship starts, it would be remiss of me not to point out that they have gone up by 8.7% under this Government, whereas apprenticeship starts collapsed under the last Government since 2020.

Derek Twigg (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): Further education colleges play a crucial role in apprenticeships and in supporting education. Will the Minister tell me what extra measures the Government are bringing in to ensure that further education colleges naturally provide a wide range of education and technical skills to apprentices?

Paul Waugh: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for FE in his constituency, as are many Members across the House. He is right about FE, and many specialists who are engaged in teaching further education and vocational skills are addressing the point he raises. That is why many of them support a move to V-Levels, because they are aligned with what employers want. Employers are telling us that they want those job skills to be more in tune with academic skills, and that is what we are delivering.

Pupils with SEND: Mainstream Schools

7. **Aphra Brandreth** (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of changes to block funding and the inclusion fund on mainstream schools' ability to meet the needs of pupils with SEND. [901330]

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): The inclusive mainstream fund is part of a £4 billion investment over three years to support early intervention for special educational needs and disabilities. Long term,

the Government aim to move more money from the high-needs block directly into school budgets ringfenced for SEND, so that schools can plan their workforces and intervene earlier, ending the long waits for support experienced by too many young people in the current system.

Aphra Brandreth: Following a recent visit to Tushingham-with-Grindley primary school, the headteacher raised concerns with me that for many small, rural schools like Tushingham and Shocklach Oviatt, the new inclusion fund does not compensate for the impact of changes to the school's block funding. Not every child with SEND needs one-to-one support, but many need teaching assistants and other staff to help them regulate, access learning and benefit from targeted support. If school budgets are being squeezed, it is often that support that ends up being reduced. How will the Minister ensure that the funding changes do not inadvertently reduce the support that children with SEND need to thrive in mainstream schools?

Georgia Gould: The reforms do not fully come in until 2030, so the extra money through the inclusive mainstream fund sits alongside investment through the current system and education, health and care plans. Once the reforms are fully in place, there will be more money going directly into schools. The inclusive mainstream fund is to build up funding in the meantime. Schools will also benefit from the Experts at Hand service, which is putting £1.8 billion into specialists.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): Dudley cannot afford to lose another generation of young people to unemployment, exclusion or missed opportunity. The rate of our young people not in education, employment or training was recognised in Alan Milburn's review. Local leaders at my February NEETs roundtable were clear: alternative provision for children with SEND is desperately needed. Dudley college has brought forward a credible plan. Will the Minister recognise the urgency and back children in Dudley by approving the plan?

Georgia Gould: I thank my hon. Friend for her leadership on that critical issue. As the Secretary of State said, we are investing £3.7 billion into new specialist places. I will meet her to discuss the specific school she raises.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): Six months ago, the previous Secretary of State revealed the Government's plan to carry out SEND reforms. Since then, we have had a new Prime Minister and a new Secretary of State, who last week stated her intention to carry out those reforms. Yet there has been little detail on how the Government will fill the £2 billion black hole in the SEND budget, despite fiscal pressures on the Government continuing to increase, as we all know. When will the legislation come to the House, and where will the money come from? Parents, teachers and children deserve answers.

Georgia Gould: We have been absolutely clear about the investment we are making in the SEND system, with £4 billion for early intervention and £3.7 billion in capital investment—funding that did not come when

the previous Government were in power. We welcome the opportunity to work cross-party and for Members to work alongside Ministers, as this is too important an issue not to bring all the ideas of the House together. I am waiting to hear what Opposition Members think about SEND reforms; I look forward to their clarifying that.

Neurodivergent Pupils: Mainstream Schools

8. **Juliet Campbell** (Broxtowe) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to improve educational outcomes for neurodivergent pupils in mainstream schools. [901331]

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): We are determined that our schools be inclusive for all children, including those with neurodivergence. The work undertaken by our neurodivergence task-and-finish group has informed our proposed reforms to the special educational needs and disabilities system, including the national inclusion standard and the investment in continuous professional development and teacher training.

Juliet Campbell: I thank the Minister for her reply. Sixty-five per cent of teacher training providers say that new teachers are not equipped to support SEND pupils in mainstream schools, with too many teachers still leaving training without the skills and confidence to support neurodivergent children, including those with dyslexia. Will the Minister consider reforming the initial training requirements so that every trainee educator is able to demonstrate practical competency in identifying and supporting neurodivergent children before achieving their qualified teacher status?

Georgia Gould: I thank my hon. Friend for her ongoing thoughtful work on this issue, which has very much informed our thinking. We have strengthened SEND content in the initial teacher training and early career framework, with Ofsted reporting that SEND is well integrated in that initial training. However, we do want to go further, and SEND will be a core focus for the 2027 review, as well as the £200 million we are investing into teacher training on special educational needs and disabilities.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): For some neurodivergent children, mainstream school is not a place where they can succeed. One such child is Livvi, who is 14. Following autistic burnout and a period of not being in education, education otherwise than at school has been an absolute godsend for her, but her amazing mum, Carrie, is worried about the Government's proposed changes to EOTAS provision. Carrie is coming to Parliament this evening; when I meet her, what should I say about whether people who have fought for their kids, like her, will get a say in what future EOTAS provision looks like?

Georgia Gould: I thank the hon. Member for raising this important issue, which came up time and again when we were travelling round the country talking to parents—both the need to support young people who have fallen out of education or are in EOTAS and the need to have a full conversation about this. The Government took forward a consultation about EOTAS, which I hope the hon. Member's constituent has responded to, and we are looking carefully at all the responses to that.

SEND Training: Autism

9. **Sir Julian Smith** (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): If she will include different autism profiles as part of SEND training for school staff. [901332]

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): Our reforms focus on better meeting pupils' needs through earlier and more effective interventions. Children can present very differently even if they have a similar diagnosis, and we want to ensure that schools have the tools to identify children's individual needs. Our special educational needs and disabilities training for staff works on areas of development, and our national inclusion standard will support that approach by ensuring mainstream settings have the knowledge, training and specialist support to deliver it.

Sir Julian Smith: I thank the Minister for her answer and for all the work she is doing on this. Following on from the question from the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Juliet Campbell), the issue of differing profiles is really important; pupils with a pathological demand avoidance profile of autism will require a totally different strategy from staff at the reception desk and teachers to get them into school and get them engaged with education. Will she keep pressing the Department on teacher training to really focus on these different profiles and the responses to them, and can she confirm that she is also working with the Department of Health and Social Care on the independent prevalence review, as all that amazing work by mental health experts across the UK should be feeding into this work?

Georgia Gould: I can confirm that I am working closely with the independent prevalence review. On PDA especially, I have heard similar things from many parents. We have a national independent panel—they are in Parliament this afternoon, and there are sessions for all parliamentarians, so I encourage Members to come along and talk to them directly. We have asked them to look at PDA because there is not a strong evidence base, which has been asked for. As well as the teacher training, which is a huge priority, these new experts—educational psychologists, occupational therapists—will provide support for teachers in classrooms.

Independent Fostering Agencies

10. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of independent fostering agencies on fostering sufficiency in England. [901333]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): We must expand fostering to create the 10,000 extra places in foster care for children that we need this Parliament. We are shaking up the system to deliver this through the fostering action plan, and independent fostering agencies can play their part, bringing fresh energy and supporting new fostering hubs.

Bob Blackman: The Minister will know that there is an increasing number of vulnerable children who desperately need good-quality foster care. At the same time, there is a crisis in the recruitment of those foster carers. Will he undertake to set up a commissioning system that includes

not only local authorities but independent fostering agencies, so that these vulnerable children can get a safe place where they are cared for, which they desperately need?

Josh MacAlister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this important issue to the attention of the House. We are introducing fostering hubs, including in the local authority in the area that he represents, and rolling out regional care co-operatives across the country. In the coming weeks, I will publish a new rule book for fostering that simplifies the system, consolidates a whole series of different bits of guidance and humanises foster care.

International Skills Partnerships

11. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What support her Department provides to help colleges and training providers develop international skills partnerships. [901334]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): The UK is joining Erasmus+ in 2027. Colleges and training providers will have access to funding for partnerships with organisations across Europe and beyond. I take this opportunity to wish Team UK success at WorldSkills Shanghai next week, especially Oliver Coombs, who has the chance to be crowned the best young person in the world in additive manufacturing and who trained at Bath college, in the hon. Lady's constituency.

Wera Hobhouse: Bath college is a shining example of how collaboration across Europe is creating opportunities for students through the WorldSkills UK programme, which the Minister has just mentioned. Will he work with the British Council to build on its international skills partnership programme so that providers such as Bath college can access funding and support? I was also wondering whether international skills could be part of the agenda of the EU summit that will happen very soon?

Josh MacAlister: I thank the hon. Lady for the question and for highlighting the British Council's role in these partnerships. A focus of the set-up of Erasmus+ will be to ensure that smaller providers can access the opportunities that comes from the programme. That is absolutely a focus of this Government. I am sure that these issues will be talked about at the summit, as they frequently are.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the recent announcement of new technical education pathways at GCSE level, which will hugely benefit pupils in Feltham and Heston and across the country. Through visits to Germany, Singapore and Australia, I have seen how we can build opportunities for increased partnerships including internationally with world-leading specialist training providers. Will the Minister confirm that the Government will look to make sure that we invest in the skilled workforce and partnerships that we need to give our students not just the best chance for a great job but the best chance for life in an increasingly competitive world?

Josh MacAlister: My hon. Friend is right to highlight that one of the benefits of Erasmus+ is that it builds on the Turing scheme as well as expanding opportunities

available through the partnerships to staff and students. It is a very good example to draw to the House's attention. Around the world we have amazing practitioners teaching in a variety of settings, and it is in everyone's benefit for them to connect with one another and be at the cutting edge of research and teaching.

SEND Specialists: Schools

12. **Jayne Kirkham** (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that schools have access to specialist expertise in SEND. [901335]

22. **Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): What progress her Department has made on ensuring that schools have access to high-quality training to support pupils with SEND. [901345]

25. **Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that schools have access to specialist expertise in SEND. [901348]

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): This Government are investing £1.8 billion over three years to deliver the Experts At Hand service, which will give mainstream settings access to health and education specialists for SEND. We will also deliver new SEND and inclusion training courses and materials as part of a £200 million investment for teachers, leaders and support staff.

Jayne Kirkham: In Cornwall and my constituency, children needing specialist SEND places have missed out this September. Some have been offered partial education otherwise than at school arrangements instead or are even at home. We inherited a system that has let down a generation. Will the Minister confirm that the new Bill is on its way and that it will close the gap for children in my constituency? When will it take effect?

Georgia Gould: We are determined to ensure that every child who needs a specialist place has access to one. That is why we are investing £3.7 billion in specialist places and are proposing the new specialist provision packages system. We recently had a full consultation on the proposals, and we are carefully working through the detailed responses that we got to the consultation questions. We will bring forward the Bill as quickly as possible.

Perran Moon: Several schools in my Camborne, Redruth and Hayle constituency are reporting profound concerns about the lack of availability of educational specialists right across Cornwall, including occupational therapists, educational psychologists and speech and language therapists. As a result of our remote coastal location, recruitment and retention is particularly difficult. Will the Minister meet Cornish MPs to discuss this issue?

Georgia Gould: I can confirm that, after very strong lobbying from my hon. Friends the Members for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) and for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham), I will be visiting Cornwall to talk to them directly and see the issues at first hand. I absolutely recognise the issues around recruitment and retention in rural areas, and we are very much working on that.

Chris Vince: I speak to parents, young people and teachers in my constituency all the time about the need for SEND reform. One of my best friends is a special educational needs co-ordinator, and he often tells me how broken he and his colleagues are after battling this broken SEND system for so long. Will the Minister ensure that the SEND reforms cater for all the young people in Harlow who need them, and that they will make being a SENCO an attractive proposition again?

Georgia Gould: I really appreciate that question. I have talked to SENCOs around the country, and I know how much pressure they are under and how often they feel that they have to go into battle for the children they support. They play a critical role, and they need more support. Inclusion has to be the business of the entire school, not just one individual. We are determined to support them.

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): I speak to many families in Broxbourne who are struggling with the SEND system. Unfortunately, until there are more SEND school places, they will continue to struggle, as children with SEND need to be in the right educational setting. What is the Department doing to create more SEND school places for families today, as they are needed now, not in the future?

Georgia Gould: Over the past two years, that £3.7 billion investment that I have mentioned has started. That money is going into local authorities today, so that they can start building schools, creating places, and taking the action that the Conservative Government failed to take.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Barely a day goes by without hearing from a new family whose child is struggling or—worse—does not have a school at all. Given the long delays in autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder diagnoses and the length of time it takes to get packages in place, what consideration has been given to screening for neurodivergence at a very early stage so that we can plan properly for those schools?

Georgia Gould: I hear the same stories from families about long waits. The new system that we are proposing is all about identifying needs as early as possible. Through the national inclusion standards, which the independent panel is working on, new tools will be developed to support schools to identify needs early, and then work will be done with the Experts at Hand service to put in place interventions to support those young people.

Hannah Spencer (Gorton and Denton) (Green): Children in Gorton and Denton are being left without suitable education while families wait for SEND tribunal appeals, but they are waiting for school places that do not exist. Does the Minister agree that we need an independent assessment of SEND school capacity? The Government reforms will not help if we do not first fix the capacity crisis.

Georgia Gould: I absolutely agree that we need more places in our schools. We are working as quickly as possible to get money into local authorities to deliver that capacity. That includes growing the number of

inclusion bases, which can be built faster and often allow children to be educated in their community. As I travel around the country, I have seen how life-changing that has been. The money that we have put in is already creating new places, and we will continue to invest this year and next.

Kinship Carers: Financial Support

13. **Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab):** What plans she has to ensure consistent financial support for kinship carers in local authority areas outside kinship zones pilot areas. [901336]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): Part of the kinship zones pilot is testing an allowance equivalent to the fostering allowance alongside a robust impact evaluation, but we are not waiting for that evaluation to improve England's approach to kinship care. Our Families First reforms are unlocking the potential of kin-based care across the country through family group decision making by default, and practical support through family network support packages.

Mike Reader: Will the Minister join me in thanking kinship carers in Northampton and across all our constituencies who give children a stable and loving home? Outside the seven zones that the Minister mentioned, funding is still means-tested. Will he therefore commit to publishing interim findings before the end of the pilot in 2029 so that families have an answer on parity before the next general election?

Josh MacAlister: I will. I would also like to pass on and share my thanks for all the amazing kinship carers we have across the country. Outside kinship zones, a number of councils are showing that they can take steps to go further than others, and Plymouth city council, Sheffield city council and North Tyneside council are great examples of that.

SEND Provision

14. **Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to improve SEND provision. [901337]

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): I have heard from parents, young people, teachers and hon. Members across the House the scale of the challenges facing the SEND system and the impact on families. We are transforming support for special educational needs across early years settings, schools and colleges so that more children and young people can get the right support locally.

Chris Hinchliff: It is difficult to overstate the trauma that the SEND crisis has inflicted on children in North East Hertfordshire, so the Government's commitment to reform is welcome. However, given the scale of the failure that families have experienced, many are nervous. Will the Minister reassure me and my constituents that the reforms will not mean pushing children into a one-size-fits-all approach and will ensure that there is a firm legal backstop so that every child receives the support they deserve?

Georgia Gould: I can confirm that these reforms are designed to ensure that the right support is available for children in every community and that there is accountability on every part of the system to deliver for families and young people, who have been let down for too long.

Local Authority SEND Services

15. **Nesil Caliskan** (Barking) (Lab): What support her Department provides to councils for SEND services. [901338]

18. **Dr Al Pinkerton** (Surrey Heath) (LD): What discussions her Department has had with local authorities on ensuring that SEND services accurately cater to levels of unmet need. [901341]

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): The Department is bringing forward reforms to improve the SEND system long term. With this investment in local authorities and other parts of the systems comes a strong focus on improvement. Through SEND reform plans, we will be carefully monitoring performance and offering support, but also intervening strongly where there is persistent failure.

Nesil Caliskan: Creating additional SEND spaces is critical for my constituency as we have had a 100% increase in education, health and care plans and an extra 1,000 students now need special educational needs support. Will the Minister reassure us that when the schools Bill comes through, as part of the proposals there will be additional support for mainstream teachers to get the training they need so that there is support in mainstream schools?

Georgia Gould: My hon. Friend has been a passionate campaigner on this issue. It is because of representations from her constituents and those of many others around the Chamber that we will be introducing compulsory professional development on special educational needs and disabilities for teachers, backed by £200 million.

Dr Pinkerton: A great number of children across Surrey have been left without the special educational provision they need this year and a disproportionate number—64%—of those who require specialist autism provision live in the new West Surrey unitary authority area. Given Surrey county council's historical failure to align provision with need, and with worrying reports that the SEND system is being allowed to collapse in Surrey's final year of operation, will the Minister directly intervene to ensure that Department for Education capital investment prioritises the specialist autism places that West Surrey desperately needs? Will she meet me and the incoming leaders of West Surrey to see how that can be done?

Georgia Gould: I will meet the hon. Member to discuss that; I have heard directly from Surrey parents and from him. We invested £16 million last year and have invested close to £19 million this year in specialist places in Surrey. We are carefully looking at Surrey's reform plan as part of our work on local authority accountability. I will keep working with the hon. Member on these important issues.

Topical Questions

T1. [901350] **Tom Rutland** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Lucy Powell): Today we are introducing a once-in-a-generation change to school food, making it tastier and healthier and giving over half a million more children free school meals. We have worked with schools, pupils, parents and many more to ensure that these meals are of good quality, attractive to children and deliverable for schools. With free breakfast clubs and a huge expansion of free school meals under this Government, children will be better able to concentrate and learn. I want to put on record my thanks to the Minister for the early years, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh)—this also happens to be his Dispatch Box debut.

Tom Rutland: I welcome my right hon. Friend to her place. Will she update the House on the package of cost-saving measures announced by this Labour Government to give families in my constituency of East Worthing and Shoreham more breathing space this September as they return to school?

Lucy Powell: We are giving families more breathing space by helping them with school uniform costs and by expanding Government-funded childcare, free school meals and free breakfast clubs. In East Worthing and Shoreham, 4,100 children will now be eligible for free school meals.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): On behalf of my party, may I send our condolences to the Prime Minister on the death of his father?

I want to ask the Secretary of State a very simple question. Does she think it is acceptable for young girls to be required to wear a hijab to school as part of their school uniform?

Lucy Powell: No.

Laura Trott: I am delighted by that answer. Thank you. This is not a hypothetical situation. A school in Barnet that has recently become state funded says that it is compulsory for girls as young as seven to cover their heads as part of the uniform. Given the Secretary of State's very welcome repudiation of this, will she intervene to stop the school's policy?

Lucy Powell: As the right hon. Lady would expect, we have been in close touch with the school. Obviously, it is a decision for the local authority, now that the school has become voluntary aided. As I understand it, the school has now clarified that hijabs are not compulsory.

T2. [901351] **Daniel Francis** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): This term has seen three new Best Start breakfast clubs open in my constituency, at Saint Paul's in Slade Green, at Gravel Hill in Bexleyheath and at St Fidelis in Northumberland Heath. Will my right hon. Friend outline timescales for when further breakfast clubs can

be rolled out across Bexleyheath and Crayford, to ensure that every primary schoolchild in my constituency starts the day ready to learn?

Lucy Powell: I am really proud of our commitment to free breakfast clubs, which are great not only for children, but for parents. We hear these testimonies all the time. They are incredibly popular and we will continue to roll them out.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The Government claimed that their policy to cap the number of branded uniform items would cut costs for parents, yet we know that some schools are getting around the rules by making optional branded items that would keep children warm in winter. Will the Minister now reconsider the Liberal Democrat proposal to cap the cost of uniform, rather than the number of items, so that we can genuinely put pounds back into parents' pockets?

Lucy Powell: I am very clear that this is about not just the letter of the law but the spirit of the law, and I want to see schools following the spirit of the new legislation. I have further powers, should I need to use them, to pull in a school's uniform policy. I do not want to see jumpers and other things that children actually have to wear being branded as optional.

T4. [901353] **Jessica Toale** (Bournemouth West) (Lab): Changes to higher education funding affecting high-cost creative subjects will cost Arts University Bournemouth in my constituency more than £300,000 this financial year. This will affect jobs and course availability, and it undermines the creative industries as a pillar of our industrial strategy. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss the funding crisis affecting our creative arts university and work with us to protect these vital institutions?

Lucy Powell: I am really happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss this, because our creative arts universities, such as the one in her constituency, provide fantastic qualifications for young people to get the jobs they need.

T3. [901352] **Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Although I welcome the changes to school food standards, Government buying standards for food still do not mandate local or British sourcing, leaving farmers in Glastonbury and Somerton locked out of supplying local schools. My good food Bill would fix this by requiring public bodies to prioritise the procurement of fresh, local, sustainably sourced food, so will the Minister commit to strengthening Government buying standards and back my good food Bill so that schools can buy produce from local farmers?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely; where schools and local caterers can, we absolutely want them to buy local. This is an important part of sustainability. We have tried to get the balance right with these food standards so that they are deliverable by schools and affordable, they are not putting up the costs of school meals, but they are providing tasty, healthier meals that ideally are locally sourced.

T5. [901354] **Lee Pitcher** (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): As Doncaster Sheffield airport moves towards reopening, I want young people in my constituency to be excited about a future career in aviation. With the first officer pilot apprenticeship now at risk of being withdrawn, what will the Secretary of State do to ensure that young people still have clear and affordable routes into aviation careers, and will she work with the British Airline Pilots Association and the industry to help make that happen?

Lucy Powell: I think I originally branded my hon. Friend Mr Doncaster airport, and I am pleased that he is still living up to that name today. He is absolutely right: this is why we are working very closely with mayors, local employers and others, so that local areas like his in Doncaster can ensure that young people have access to the qualifications and work experience they need for the local economy.

T6. [901355] **Bradley Thomas** (Bromsgrove) (Con): Special educational needs and disabilities provision and access to education, health and care plans continues to be a worry and concern for many parents in Worcestershire. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the adequacy of SEND provision in Worcestershire, and what steps are the Government taking to improve it? If she does not have a comprehensive answer, perhaps she could write to me.

Lucy Powell: I am happy to write to the hon. Member about that, but rest assured that we are working with all local authorities on their SEND plans at the moment to ensure that they are robust, deliverable and affordable.

T7. [901356] **Mary Glendon** (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): Earlier this year, Ravenswood primary school in Newcastle applied to the school rebuilding programme as surveys had deemed the school building to be beyond repair. A subsequent visit promised by the Department has not materialised. Can the Secretary of State expedite a meeting with the Department, the school and Newcastle city council's cabinet member to discuss the current status of the application?

Lucy Powell: The Minister for school estates, my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), would be really happy to meet my hon. Friend, because I know how important this issue is to her constituents.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): Several of my constituents have contacted me about the broken SEND transport system. Several of them did not know what transport would be put in place for their children before the term started, as decisions were delayed. Some of them still do not know how their SEND children are going to get to school. What can the Minister do to help?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Paul Waugh): The Government's SEND reforms will create a more inclusive school system, with fewer children needing to travel to access the quality education that they deserve. I take onboard the hon. Member's concerns, which we are listening to, but we want to make it

absolutely clear that ensuring drivers and passenger assistants have received the training necessary to respond to all children's needs is central to Government policy.

T8. [901357] **Jonathan Davies** (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): This summer we found that the number of GCSE and A-level music entrants was down, in line with the general trend that we have seen over the past 16 years. I know that the Government want to address that, which is why they commissioned the National Centre for Arts and Music Education, which was due to start its work at the beginning of this academic year. Can Ministers tell me whether the centre is up and running, and who has won the contract to run it?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend raises a really important issue. Music qualifications have fallen off a cliff, which is why we are taking those steps. The procurement process has begun, so I can outline for him soon what further steps we are taking. I also want to work with musicians such as Ed Sheeran, Fatboy Slim and others who have been campaigning for a music curriculum that actually attracts young people to take it up.

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): Last week's PISA results confirmed that the gap in outcomes for disadvantaged pupils remains stark throughout their education, so will the Secretary of State commit to looking seriously at proposals from the Lib Dems and others to extend the pupil premium to post-16 education?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Member raises a really important issue. It is not just about keeping young people in further education, which the measure that he outlines would assist with; it is also about engaging young people in school more thoroughly, which is why the whole range of reforms that I have begun to sketch out are so important.

T9. [901358] **Alistair Strathern** (Hitchin) (Lab): Shockingly, 16 to 19-year-olds face higher rates of domestic abuse than any other age group. With the worst corners of the internet peddling increasingly extreme attitudes to them around sex and relationships, surely we owe them better. That is why my private Member's Bill builds on the inspiring campaigner Faustine Petron's work to make it mandatory to ensure that young people up to the age of 18 have healthy spaces to explore these issues in school and at college. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss how we can make that vision a reality?

Lucy Powell: I know that the Minister has spoken to my hon. Friend. His Bill raises an important issue, and I want to see relationship education and all the issues around that extended as far and wide as possible, because it is absolutely critical in the social media age.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Sampford Arundel, Rockwell Green, Thurlbear and Bishop Henderson are just four schools in my constituency that plan their grants on the basis of having the sport premium grant. Now it has been removed, how will they fund sport, and have the Government made any assessment of how many PE teachers are losing their jobs as a result of this change?

Lucy Powell: I want to see sport and PE flourishing in our schools, and that is something I have already spoken about. I am happy to meet the hon. Member to discuss that further.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I welcome the announcements on school meals, but given that young campaigners at Bite Back last week identified that some three quarters of secondary schools do not provide meals that meet Government standards, what can the Minister do to boost enforcement?

Paul Waugh: The updated standards that we have announced today will ensure that school food is delicious, nutritious and practical for schools. I was proud to see Bite Back and a range of sector leaders welcome our standards, and I thank them all for the hard work they do to help schools achieve what we want.

Suella Braverman (Fareham and Waterlooville) (Reform): We all know that child safeguarding is non-negotiable, so does the Secretary of State share my concern that the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children's most recent schools briefing appears to put the safety of girls at risk, given that it has removed the express requirement that adult supervisors of pupils getting dressed should be of the same gender or sex? Does the Secretary of State agree that the NSPCC should clarify its guidance to comply with the law so that men and boys have no place in girls' changing rooms?

Lucy Powell: The Department for Education guidance is clear on this, and it differs from the NSPCC's, so I refer the right hon. and learned Member to the DFE guidance.

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): A new report by the charity Become shows that personal advisers are in some cases supervising up to 46 young care leavers each. These are the people who can make the difference between young people setting out into adulthood well or feeling completely on their own. Will the Minister therefore commit not just to reviewing the support, but to a funded national strategy and a cap on caseloads, so that no care leaver in Southampton or anywhere in this country has to face adulthood alone?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): I welcome Become's report, which builds on the review into the early deaths of care leavers that I commissioned a few months ago. I would like to thank Ashley John-Baptiste and Clare Chamberlain for their important work in bringing to the country's attention the tragic number of young care leavers who die far too young. That transition to adulthood is an important moment to get right. PAs play a crucial role in that. We are looking at additional training for PAs and also at changing the regulation that sits around them, so we can set a higher expectation.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I have been contacted by students, parents and teachers in my constituency telling me that the cost of transport is a key barrier to accessing education and other opportunities. A 19-year-old told me recently that it costs her more than £9 for a return fare to the county town of Hereford, and Hereford sixth-form college has told me that 21 young

people dropped out last year because of transport problems. Does the Secretary of State recognise that the cost of travel is a big barrier to accessing education, training and work? Will she work with Cabinet colleagues and the Treasury to implement free bus travel for all young people, in order to invest in them?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Member raises an important issue, and she is absolutely spot on. I have seen the difference in Greater Manchester of the former mayor's "Our pass", which is still there to give free travel to 16 to 19-year-olds. I have also seen the difference it made over August for all young people to have free travel then. She can rest assured that the Prime Minister is making the cost of bus travel, particularly for young people, an absolute priority, and I will continue to work with Cabinet colleagues on it.

Chris Ward (Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven) (Lab): In Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven we are lucky enough to have two brilliant universities. Both are trying everything they can to adapt to the funding pressures they are under, but it still means that the University of Sussex is making cuts of £35 million a year, and just this morning the University of Brighton announced plans to potentially sell one of its campuses. What can the Secretary of State do to reassure me and give hope to students and staff at the universities that we will get a grip of the funding crisis that we inherited from the last Government and make universities thrive?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He has fantastic universities in his constituency. I am worried about the pressures facing higher education funding and am looking at these issues closely. As he will know, they are autonomous organisations, but I am doing what I can with Cabinet colleagues to make people aware of the precarious nature of the situation.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): Students on the Manhood peninsula in my constituency have no access to post-16 education unless they travel into the city to go to the brilliant Chichester college, and those parents who are paying for a student's bus fare are struggling to find, on average, £1,200 a year to get them there. Given that it is estimated that one in five students is not in regular education even though they are signed up for college,

what steps can the Secretary of State take to make sure that all those living in coastal areas can access post-16 education, and that parents can afford to get them there?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely hear the hon. Lady. I know how closely related transport and its costs are with young people having access to the education and training that they need. Rest assured, this is a priority for the Government.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): A constituent's 11-year-old autistic daughter attempted suicide last year, and she continues to experience severe anxiety and autistic burnout. The family still have no clarity about her education provision for this new term. Will the Government ensure that schools are able to offer placements to children like my constituent's daughter only when they have the staffing expertise, resource and specialist support necessary to meet that child's identified needs?

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): I am deeply sorry to hear about the experience of my hon. Friend's constituent; nobody should have to go through that. We want every school to be an inclusive school, in which there teachers are trained and there are experts on hand to support children, so that no one is in that position in future.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Reform): Will the Secretary of State for Education join me in commending my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Fareham and Waterlooville (Suella Braverman) on her proposal that every school in the land should fly the Union flag every day of the year, and that every school should sing the national anthem at assembly at least once a week? Is that not a policy that the Government could implement now, instead of waiting for a Reform UK Government to implement it?

Lucy Powell: I miss the exchanges that I had with the hon. Gentleman when I was Leader of the House, but now that he is in his new place, I look forward to having them again. This is obviously a matter for headteachers to decide for their schools, and I am all for headteacher autonomy. British values absolutely run right through our curriculum, like the words running through a stick of rock. We can see that British values are right at the heart of it, and I am very proud of that.

Speciality Steel UK

3.47 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): With permission, I shall make a statement on Speciality Steel UK, but before I do so, I would like to say that I know the thoughts of the whole House will be with the Prime Minister following the passing of his father Roy earlier today.

The workers at Speciality Steel UK have faced years of uncertainty. The plants have been mothballed and the jobs furloughed for several years. This outrageous situation is a monument to years of neglect by successive Conservative Governments who let this industry decline, but this Government and I have taken a different approach. We have done all we can to rebuild the sector, and we have confronted its challenges head-on. In the case of Speciality Steel, complex ownership structures and opaque financing arrangements have amplified the headwinds of the wider sector. I do not need to remind the House about this case's links to a prominent ongoing corporate scandal involving a former Conservative Prime Minister.

As the House may recall, Speciality Steel UK entered liquidation in August last year, with the independent court-appointed official receiver managing the liquidation process. Since then, the Government have provided funding to enable the official receiver to carry out his statutory duties, including maintaining site safety, supporting employees and conducting a sales process for the business and its assets. Throughout that period, our priority has been facilitating a private sector solution. The official receiver engaged with a range of interested parties and earlier this year identified a preferred bidder. That bidder subsequently requested Government support to make its purchase of Speciality Steel UK possible. However, following extensive engagement between the bidder and its advisers, and having done all the due diligence and given the case the consideration that taxpayers would expect, the Government have decided that they cannot provide support on the proposed terms.

This decision has not been taken lightly. For over a year, we have funded the official receiver process, while working constructively on efforts to secure a private buyer. We took a long, hard look at the offer that was on the table, but the truth is that we had serious concerns about the proposed financing of it, the protections for UK taxpayers, and whether it could offer long-term stability for the local economy and community. Having concluded that we cannot support the preferred bidder's proposal, we are faced with a choice: we can allow events to take their course through the liquidation process, and risk being left with no say in the future of the sites, or we can act. This Government choose to act.

We have made a commitment to reindustrialise Britain—to bring good growth to every postcode of our country. Backing the proud communities of Stocksbridge, Rotherham, Wednesbury and Brinsworth is absolutely part of that commitment. These workers and those across the wider business have endured a prolonged period of uncertainty. The Government cannot accept the prospect of another prolonged process that will create more worry and anxiety for workers, deter businesses and hang over the local community. Nor can we accept a situation in which decisions impacting the future of communities in South Yorkshire are effectively taken by

default, rather than through a deliberate assessment of what will best support growth, opportunity and prosperity in the years ahead.

We will therefore engage with the official receiver's sale process and develop a proposal for the public acquisition of SSUK. This will preserve strategic control and ensure that all credible future opportunities can be properly considered before irreversible decisions are taken. We are taking this step because SSUK occupies a unique place in the UK's steel ecosystem. It offers specialist capabilities that have served advanced manufacturing supply chains, including in aerospace and defence. In other words, it is capable of supplying the growth-driving sectors of our economy—those that we have committed to supporting through our industrial strategy. SSUK's strategic value extends well beyond its economic contribution. It lies in its specialist steelmaking capabilities, which have historically produced products like aircraft landing gear, helicopter rotors, missiles and munitions. It would not be right to let this go by default.

I want to make an important clarifying point: we will work towards public acquisition, but that is not the end of the process, or the end of the conversation about the long-term future of the business and its sites. It means that we are keeping our options open while Government, local leaders, industry experts, private investors, workers and other partners consider what is best for these strategically important locations.

I want to thank those Members of this House with SSUK sites in their constituencies for their engagement with my Department, and I welcome their continued input. That includes my right hon. Friend the Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey), and my hon. Friends the Members for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Dr Tidball), and for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance). I recognise the role played by the Mayor of South Yorkshire, Oliver Coppard, and his team in ensuring a joined-up vision for the future of South Yorkshire. I welcome the work that I know we will do in lockstep to deliver this future.

Working towards public acquisition will create the time and space necessary for undertaking a full assessment of the opportunities available. It will let us consider future industrial use, regeneration opportunities and the role that specialist manufacturing capabilities could play in supporting growth and our national resilience. One option that will be assessed carefully is the future of speciality steel production. However, we are not prejudging the outcome of that assessment. All options will be considered rigorously against their economic and industrial benefits, their impact on regional growth and their value for money. I should note that all future decisions and spending commitments will be subject to detailed due diligence and funded from existing Government budgets.

Our announcement today must also be seen in the wider context of the Government's commitment to the future of the British steel industry. Steel remains fundamental to our economy, our infrastructure, our energy system, our advanced manufacturing base and our national security. It underpins critical supply chains and supports thousands of skilled jobs across the United Kingdom. That is why we nationalised British Steel earlier this year; why we intervened to secure stability and maintain production at the site while we develop

long-term options; and why we secured a better deal for the steel communities of south Wales, with £500 million of Government support for a new electric arc furnace at Port Talbot.

In our steel strategy, we committed to stabilising and rebuilding the steel sector. What is more, we set out a goal of supporting productive and profitable steel producers that can meet their customers' needs, strengthen our national security and provide high-quality, secure, long-term jobs, backed by private investment. That was not an empty promise or wishful thinking. We have acted to tackle the challenge posed by global steel overcapacity through trade measures that protect our domestic production from unfair pressure and support the viability of the nation's steelmaking.

I want to speak directly to the workers of Speciality Steel UK, who have been stuck on furlough, unable to do the jobs of which they are so rightly proud, through no fault of their own. I know that they feel ignored and let down by previous Governments, but as Business Secretary, I will not duck these difficult decisions, and neither will this Government. I will do all that I can to secure a bright future for you, your communities and your families.

Taken together, these actions demonstrate that this Government are serious about reindustrialising Britain, and the steel sector playing its part. We want to attract private investment, strengthen domestic supply chains and ensure that industrial communities have a genuine opportunity to thrive in the decades ahead. That is why we are moving towards the public acquisition of Speciality Steel UK. As ever, I commit to keeping all Members informed as this important work progresses. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

3.56 pm

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): On behalf of Conservative Members, I send my thoughts to the Prime Minister, following the tragic passing of his father.

I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. In her statement to the House following the insolvency of Speciality Steel UK in September last year, the then Minister for Industry, the hon. Member for Croydon West (Sarah Jones), stated that the Government would pursue every avenue to keep the company's sites producing, as part of the Government's wider work to grow a resilient domestic steel industry. We can all agree that the compulsory winding-up order against Liberty Speciality Steels created a great deal of uncertainty, especially for the more than 1,000 workers employed there. I am keen to hear how the Government have kept their promise to stand by the entire workforce throughout this process, including while overseeing bids to sell former assets. Will any redundancies follow nationalisation?

However, continuous operational failures have already pushed businesses into a state of chronic uncertainty; a failure to file accounts for more than six years led to a separate prosecution by Companies House, and there was an investigation by the Serious Fraud Office into suspected fraud, fraudulent trading and money laundering. The Secretary of State said that the official receiver wanted to gain a better understanding of the company's business and the conduct of its directors in the period

leading up to the liquidation. Can he give an update on any investigations into conduct that the Government have undertaken, and on any steps taken to recover money belonging either to the business or to the British taxpayer?

Despite the rhetoric about the Government supporting the UK steel industry, all that the industry has experienced is increased pressure and apprehension. From the steel strategy, which is likely to lead to ever higher costs for taxpayers, to the introduction of the UK carbon border adjustment mechanism, which fatally weakens our national resilience, the survivability of steel producers is becoming more difficult. Indeed, a manufacturer in my constituency told me some months ago that it will likely dissolve by Christmas if the Government do not change course.

Energy prices are also a significant hurdle for steel plants. The Government's Clean Power 2030 action plan risks making things worse; it could force rapid change without ensuring the infrastructure or investment to support it, while increasing costs for manufacturers and threatening jobs in key industrial communities. Nearly 92% of global steel production faces no comparable carbon pricing. Only the UK, the EU, Canada and New Zealand, covering just 8% of global output, apply prices in the £30 to £70 per tonne range, but we expect our industry to compete with countries that pay a fraction of that, or nothing at all.

The Secretary of State will say that the Government are helping to address the burden of high bills for manufacturers via the British industrial competitiveness scheme, but unfortunately their efforts are too little, too late. Having a strong steel industry is vital to our national security and resilience. Traditional bulk commodity steelmaking is vital to our national infrastructure, and modern advanced steel manufacturing is a vital foundation for sectors such as aerospace, defence, nuclear and automotive, all of which are critical, given rising geopolitical tensions. I understand that another issue facing Speciality Steel UK was having the capital to buy raw materials that would allow the continued production of advanced steels, such as the landing gears produced at Stocksbridge. Could the Government therefore outline what support has been given to maintain site operation through this process, and whether advanced steel manufacturing will be a priority following nationalisation?

Circling back to the Government's commitment to pursue every avenue, can the Minister explain how much consideration has been given to private investment as a solution? How much was spent on private sector solutions before the decision to nationalise, and what was the main basis for that decision? Considering that a preferred bidder had been identified, it is surprising that the Government have moved away from this completely. Indeed, at the Business and Trade Committee on 22 June, the Department's director for materials and industry noted that "significant investment" was required, and stressed that the majority of this should come from the private sector. Other than a new Prime Minister who is ideologically committed to nationalisation, what has changed? Will the Minister outline the terms asked for by the private bidder that the Government were not willing to agree to? If the business has unique capabilities and demand is there for its products, does that not imply that the barrier to a viable private sector buyer is either the Government's own ideological obsession with

[Bradley Thomas]

nationalisation, or an economic climate in which it is increasingly impossible to run a successful manufacturing business in Britain?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank the shadow Minister for his response. I particularly appreciate his words for the Prime Minister, which I know he will appreciate, as will his family.

The shadow Minister began with a long list of neglect regarding the policy, operations and ownership of this particular set of steel businesses. The obvious question is why the Conservatives did not do anything about it when they were in power—it certainly was not for want of requests to act from Labour Members. He has asked for reassurances about the workforce, and I am happy to give those to him. The cost of funding the official receiver, both to date and ongoing, is essentially the wages of the staff. They are in a position where they will be paid, which is paramount.

The shadow Minister talked about the business environment. I say politely to all Conservative colleagues that they left us with the highest industrial energy prices in the developed world. That was the legacy—it is not due to any policy changes made by Labour. What do our industrial subsidies mean? For a sector such as steel, where an electric arc furnace is obviously incredibly energy intensive, the supercharger package—not the BICS package, because the supercharger package applies in this case—will bring down average electricity prices from approximately £168 per megawatt-hour to £86 per megawatt-hour. It is not just about being competitive with peers; that is a genuinely competitive position with our rivals. We introduced those subsidies because we were aware that the business environment we inherited from the Conservative party was not satisfactory. We had to act, which is why we have done so.

Turning to wider measures, yes, we have activated a substantial trade defence policy. That is not just about maintaining domestic production; it is about being a country where the rules of the game apply. If we want people to be based here in the UK, they have to be able to take advantage of effective trade remedies when they are facing unfair competition. I know that that is an issue for the downstream users, but it is the position that I think the country has to take. What the shadow Minister has said about carbon border adjustment mechanisms is, I think, a new policy since I was last Secretary of State—the Conservatives are perhaps disowning the policies they had at the end of the last Government, because they were certainly committed to CBAMs then. Of course, CBAMs are fundamentally about trying to maintain fair competition between carbon-intensive sectors in developed countries such as ours and the rest of the world, so there is a little bit of incoherence there, to say the least.

On the issue of working capital, the opportunity presented to us by Speciality Steel UK is that previously, the business only produced when the customer effectively supplied working capital—a highly irregular position, but one reflective of the opaque and byzantine financing arrangements under the previous owners. I believe the opportunity exists to operate a successful business in this space. There is nothing ideological about this; my ideal is for the business to be run in the private sector.

The shadow Minister has asked why we could not take forward the preferred bidder. I will not go into the details, but when I come to this Dispatch Box I have to be satisfied that any public support given meets the reasonable conditions we would expect, such as that taxpayer money will be protected and will not be spent without delivering the outcome for which it has been granted. If I cannot do that, I cannot grant that subsidy, which I think is the position any Secretary of State would have to take.

What is the barrier to a private sector solution? Effectively, it is risk—the fact that this was left so long without activity from the Conservative Government and the workforce have not been making steel. The customers are therefore in a position where that is a big, substantial challenge for any private sector entity to take on. If we do end up with a public ownership position, I think the state will be better able to take on that challenge, but it is the legacy of neglect that has been the barrier. That is exactly what this Government are determined to resolve.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Today is a really good day. I have been in this Chamber for more than a decade, watching my industry being allowed to wither on the vine. Secretary of State, a huge thank you to you for understanding the potential in the Rotherham, Brinsworth, and Stocksbridge sites, which work hand in hand. It is not just about the sites themselves, but the infrastructure around them. We have a whole supply chain that needs these sites back and running again. Of course, this is green steel, or recycled steel, so it fits exactly with the Government's industrial strategy—it is the linchpin.

Secretary of State, thank you for continuing the pay so far and thank you for committing to continue it for the next six months. Can he also speak a little about the training that the staff will get? While they are grateful to be furloughed, they want to be working, and that means that they need to be fit the day that he says we can open the doors. They want to be ready to go. Can he also say a little about product accreditation? Literally every week, I have people from around the country calling in, trying to purchase steel. However, to purchase it, accreditation needs to be in place. Finally, can he speak a little about any anticipated restart costs? I know the workers are doing all they can to maintain the sites, but there are likely to be costs. Today is a good day, and I thank the Secretary of State.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Can all Members look at the Chair when speaking? Sometimes we cannot hear what is said. Also, the Member is not addressing the Secretary of State, but the Chair. It will help us all if we do it that way.

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank my hon. Friend for her engagement, her support and her advocacy on behalf of her constituents. This has been and is a difficult situation for them, and it is exactly because of our commitment that we are seeking to resolve things in a favourable way. The work we can now do will have to look at the capacities, the potential for new investment that might be required, the product lines, where the customers are

and so forth. The key issue—I am not sure if this has ever been put on the record in *Hansard* before—is homologation. That is the assets of these sites and the accreditations they have for such a speciality set of products. Those assets are incredibly valuable. Not many parts of the world can produce to the standard that we are talking about. We now have a process—I want that to be as short as possible—where we can assess that. I will remain in close contact with her. I want to be in a position where, if we can take this forward, we can pass that good news on to her constituents.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): First, may I pass on my condolences and those of my party to the Prime Minister on the sad passing of his father? I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. We Liberal Democrats recognise that national security, energy security and food security are all intertwined. Steel is critical to our renewables sector, our defence and our national infrastructure. In a previous debate on this company, we said on the record that nothing should be off the table, and we look forward to receiving further details from the Secretary of State as the process continues.

I have a few questions for the Secretary of State. First, on jobs and the employees, can he offer any further information not just on training, as another hon. Member has raised, but on the timeline by which staff will have more information about what this decision means for them? The Secretary of State highlighted that this process may end up in public acquisition. Is he in a position to say how much that would likely cost the taxpayer? Can he give us a broad estimate or range for how much those costs might be? Related to that, I note that the Secretary of State said that it would be funded through existing budgets. Can he say where that money might come from and whether it might get redirected from other sources of funding, such as for transport, energy projects or something else?

I have two final questions. We know that the warning lights were flashing for a very long time—the Secretary of State mentioned that himself. Will there be any formal process to look at the lessons learned, both politically and administratively, to make sure that something like this never happens again? Finally, he will know that as well as using domestic steel suppliers for our British procurement, the way to really boost British industry is to have a stronger relationship with Europe, so that British steel can be used throughout supply chains and procurement right across Europe. Will the Government look at strengthening that relationship?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. I entirely endorse what she said about the centrality of steel to security and infrastructure, and, indeed, I echo her words. This is entirely pragmatic. I am seeking to resolve a series of long-running problems, which a great many of my Conservative predecessors—and there were a great many—ignored, considering them to be too difficult. That is the central lesson that I would learn: we have to be willing to confront these hard problems. We might think that we can pass them on to the next person, but that is not serving the country in the way that is required.

Let me now deal with the hon. Lady's specific questions. I expect this process to take between four and six months, but I want it to be resolved as quickly as possible. I think it important to point out that there are costs either way: there are costs involved in running the business in public ownership, and there would also be costs to the state from the remediation and regeneration, partly because of the legacy of public ownership but also because such big steel industrial sites come with so many issues to resolve if they are remediated that some of that would fall on the Exchequer. If this were a matter of public ownership, we would have to pay off the creditors, reach an accommodation with them, acquire the assets, and then inject some working capital over a period of between one and three years. I would expect the cost of that to be about £350 million, and I would expect something comparable were the option to be regeneration and remediation.

The hon. Lady asked about existing budgets. We knew when we came to power that we needed to pay attention to the steel industry. There was a commitment in our manifesto for £2.5 billion, on top of on top of the £500 million that was granted to Tata in Port Talbot under the previous Government. We have spent some of that, although the lion's share of the sum has gone to British Steel, but the support for Tata has continued. Some of the money has gone on the official receiver process here. We have that existing budget in which to commence this work. These are obviously significant assets, and I think that this is an entirely appropriate use of them.

The hon. Lady also mentioned the relationship with Europe. She will know that when the European Union changed its own trade defence measures on steel, that had some adverse consequences for us. My call to Commissioner Šefčovič was one of my first in the job, for a number of reasons. We talked explicitly about this, and are seeking a resolution specifically on steel, which I believe would be in our interests and those of the European Union.

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): I welcome the direction that the Secretary of State has set out today. Wednesbury Bright Bar is part of Speciality Steel UK. It is a specialist steel-finishing plant that produces precision-engineered bright steel bar in the heart of the UK metal-finishing industry area. It is used for automotive and advanced manufacturing across the Black Country and beyond. This is not primary steel production, and it will need a clear strategy separate from that for the primary steel production, which is the business in Rotherham, in Stocksbridge and elsewhere in the country. What specific consideration will the Secretary of State give to securing the long-term future of Wednesbury Bright Bar as part of work towards the public acquisition of Speciality Steel UK, and how will this support the skills, jobs and manufacturing supply chains across the west midlands and beyond?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to the hon. Member for her support and engagement on behalf of her constituents. There is a co-dependency between the four sites in terms of how the business operates, but any long-term consideration, whether in the private or the public sector of the business, will have to include consideration of products, customers and markets if

[Jonathan Reynolds]

the business is to be run profitably. That will be central to the assessment that we can now make. However, I can give the hon. Member the reassurance that every part of this business clearly has worth—which is why they have been grouped in this way, historically and in a contemporary sense—and, of course, we are seeking the best solution for the workers in all four of the plants.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): We know that Speciality Steel has been severely impacted by high electricity costs, and we know just what that means from people in Scunthorpe, the constituency next to mine, which is a very heavy user of electricity. They are paying 50% more for their electricity than is being paid in France, for instance. However, the Government insist on phasing out the blast furnaces. Once we have electric arcs in Scunthorpe, people there will have to use twice as much electricity, paying much more. Does the Secretary of State agree that we cannot reindustrialise Britain simply through public ownership, but must reduce our energy costs? Will he take steps, over the next year or two, not to worry about green energy and all that, but just to reduce our energy costs to a level roughly equivalent to that in France?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am always grateful for the support of the Father of the House, who has a long-standing interest in all industrial matters. However, I consider myself more obsessed with industrial energy prices than, frankly, any other Member of this House. I am great company when this subject comes up.

On electric arc furnaces—which are the technology in use here and will be, I hope, in Scunthorpe at some point—we already have in place a set of policies that do not just put us on a par with some of our rivals, but actually give us a competitive position. That is the supercharger scheme for the most energy-intensive electricity users. The Father of the House will know that we have also launched, as part of the industrial strategy, the British industrial competitiveness scheme which is about to come into force. In effect, it is a scheme for manufacturers, and again it significantly moves the dial on their competitiveness.

I recognise this issue, but we have done more than previous Governments, and we will continue to do more on it. I agree entirely with the Father of the House's case, but I think we must recognise the very substantial work that has already gone on. I considered BICS to be the centrepiece of the industrial strategy when we launched it, because it moves the dial so significantly on our competitiveness not just for steel, but across a range of manufacturing sectors.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I acknowledge and thank the Secretary of State for the substantial support given to the steel industry, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) said, is in direct contrast to the Conservatives, who did very little when they were in government. However, he will know of the particular concerns at Llanwern steelworks about the new quota levels for galvanised steel. Can I ask him to acknowledge that, to listen to the concerns of the workers at Llanwern and to tell us what more he is doing?

Jonathan Reynolds: Again, I am grateful to my hon. Friend, with whom I have been discussing steel matters in this House for many years. I am aware of the specific challenges at Llanwern. I believe it is a very sound business, and our trade defence measures will directly benefit it. Again, we have to strike a balance. People would sometimes like us to go further in one direction than the other, but this is all part of the support we have given the steel industry. I believe that the downstream use she mentioned will be central to the future of steel production in Wales.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): There is a central inconsistency in the Secretary of State's argument. He talks about steel as a strategic asset, and I of course agree with that, but so are oil and gas, yet the Government do not seem to be coming forward with any proposals on that sector. He mentioned in his oral statement that the Government are going to pay this from "existing Government budgets", but in answer to a question, he said that the money would possibly "fall on the Exchequer", so how much is this going to cost? He also mentioned that he would prefer for the business to remain in the private sector, which is encouraging to hear, so does he have an indicative timetable for when it might go back on the market and be sold?

Jonathan Reynolds: The right hon. Member will understand that I will not comment on matters pertaining to the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, but stick to the considerable number of issues in the domain of BIST. He specifically asked about cost. The cost for the official receiver is £11 million a month, which is in the main to meet the payroll cost of the more than 1,200 members of staff that the sites employ. That is what we have done to date, and it is what we will continue to do.

On returning it to the private sector, we first have to see whether there is an opportunity to save this business. That may require public acquisition, as I said in my statement. If we follow the path in that direction, we would have to inject working capital—the process can now ascertain what that sum of money would be—to make the products and the business plan attractive and enable a return to the private sector, but that is a long way down the road. If we put in public money, I would want a return for that public money. I am more than willing—keen, in fact—to see this business return to the private sector, but if we put in public money to turn it around, I would obviously want to protect that money. I think is an entirely pragmatic and reasonable consideration.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I welcome this statement, which shows a Labour Government once again stepping in to protect jobs and protect our specialist steel industry. What steps will the Government take to get this steelmaking business back up and running, and what intervention will they be making with those in the downstream sector to support them to buy British wherever possible?

Jonathan Reynolds: The process to date has in effect been working with potential private sector bidders on the viability of their plans. That task is entirely different from what we can do now, which is essentially to assess whether there is a viable future for this business under public acquisition. If there is—and, again, the strength

of the products and the history of these sites are well known, as we have discussed in the House today—the opportunity would present itself to return to steel production.

My hon. Friend mentions the changes to procurement, and yes, there have been considerable changes to what we can do. In the main, I would say that when steel products are made in the UK, they do tend to be purchased in the UK. There is a significant export side to the UK business, but they are in the main purchased around that. Historically, the problem has been goods and products that we do not make in the UK and have had to import. Again, I think there are gaps in the market in that regard.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): I congratulate the Government on making the decision to take Speciality Steel UK into public ownership, but the truth is that it should have been taken earlier. The preferred bidder was never going to perform. It has never made any steel, it did not have any money, it was seeking aggressive financing and it was using an investment adviser who fundamentally failed. I am troubled that the Government are now using the same investment adviser to advise them on British Steel. I urge the Government and the Secretary of State, who are doing the right thing with steel, to come up with a combined vision for Speciality Steel UK and British Steel. Merge them, invest in them, get the working capital going and get the production going. That will make it viable, that will get the cash flow positive again and that is in the strategic national interest.

Jonathan Reynolds: I welcome the support from the hon. Gentleman for the decisive action we are taking. On his point about potentially combining British Steel and, if it were acquired in the public interest, Speciality Steel UK, I urge caution in that regard. The job required at Scunthorpe and Teesside for British Steel is in itself a significant industrial transformation. Not many transformations of this kind or scale have actually been done in Europe. What Tata Steel is doing with us in Port Talbot is a significant example of that. This is another set of issues. I think the House is aware that a different set of factors that really pertain to ownership have led us to this situation, so there are two distinct problems. We are taking action on both, but they are distinct and I would not at this stage recommend the bringing together of those two things. That is too big a task. We are better served by looking at them as distinct things to solve.

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his positive announcement. Downstream businesses in Stourbridge, Brierley Hill and Netherton used to source many items from Speciality Steel UK. I spent a lot of time working with it and the Department and Ministers to update product codes ahead of the tariff that Spain introduced. I am grateful for their engagement during that time. I understand that the upscaling of production will take time, but will he commit to continuing to work with the industry as the products come back online in the UK, so that none of the businesses in my constituency or elsewhere in the country are unfairly penalised?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank my hon. Friend for her support and for her question. My ideal is that I want steelworkers making steel. I do not think that is complicated, but it has been too complicated to date. All we are

seeking is a chance for those proud people to return to the jobs that they so love and which have defined their communities for so many years. It will not be easy. I am grateful for the support across the House today, but it will not be easy. We are deliberately taking on this challenge rather than ignoring it and walking away, as I believe other Governments have done. I will remain closely engaged with her on the question she raises about how best to do that.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): In his reference to the wider steel industry in his statement, the Secretary of State mentioned Scunthorpe. He knows that I have consistently supported the Government in the actions they have taken to keep the works going. I think he is a little too eager to criticise the previous Government; I gently remind him that for about 18 months they paid the wages and the bills at Scunthorpe to keep the jobs there. I appreciate that we get written statements, but when does he anticipate being able to come to the House and give an oral statement about the future of Scunthorpe?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He and I have discussed this issue many times. I remember calling him to tell him that we were about to recall Parliament at that particularly significant time for the site at Scunthorpe. I am always aware of his substantial constituency interest. We will rekindle that relationship, if that is the right terminology. He will have seen that we have just appointed a chair of British Steel. I am eager to crack on with the work that is required on a transformational plan for Scunthorpe. As soon as I have substantive information to share, I am always happy to come to the House to talk about steel. If he has any specific questions, he knows that he can contact me directly and I will always seek to give him the answers he needs.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his support for domestic steelmaking. People do not often think of Monmouthshire as a steelmaking community, but we have excellent downstream steelmaking companies and hundreds of workers going every day to Llanwern, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden). Will the Secretary of State share what the Government are doing to support downstream steel and to ensure that we are buying more Welsh steel in all UK projects and construction that are undertaken?

Jonathan Reynolds: The quality of the downstream products we create in the UK, particularly in Wales, is well known, but there are gaps in the market. I often compare the level of domestic consumption in most European countries to where we are with domestic production in the UK, and there are clearly gaps in that market. That has always been about the need to improve the business environment, so that the sector can work constructively with the Government to provide the public-private capex solutions that we have seen a lot of across Europe but have not seen many of in the UK. I am grateful to my hon. Friend and to all colleagues who make the case for what is, I believe, a business and a sector fundamentally important to the UK.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The Secretary of State mentioned the wider steel sector in his statement. I raise the issues experienced by Fowler and Gilbert and EverEdge in my constituency, both of which manufacture steel products and have been impacted by quotas and tariffs on steel imports. That is particularly the case with materials not produced in the UK, because it essentially adds a manufacturing tax to the work that they do. While their raw material costs are rising, there are no equivalent restrictions on imported finished products, particularly low-quality and low-cost imports from China. Those businesses face a situation where it is cheaper to import from overseas than to manufacture in the UK. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss the concerns of those businesses, which are significant local employers in my constituency, and to find a solution that works for the whole steel sector?

Jonathan Reynolds: I acknowledge the issues that the hon. Lady raises. She knows that our trade defence measures are a necessary response to global over-production. It is a problem that every Trade, Commerce and Business Minister around the world must grapple with. The role of our trade defence measures is to provide a level playing field for domestic production. If the hon. Lady believes that there is inconsistency with the products that are needed in her constituency, we are happy to meet her to take the matter forward. There is sometimes misalignment between certain product codes and trade defence measures. However, I genuinely believe that there is a consensus across the House that we have to be a country that is willing to intervene sometimes to ensure that there is a level playing field, both for the sectors directly affected and because, frankly, no one would base their business here if they thought it could be wiped out by the unfair competition that, I am afraid, is sometimes a feature of the global economy.

Pamela Nash (Motherwell, Wishaw and Carlisle) (Lab): I wholeheartedly welcome the Government's action to secure the Speciality Steel UK sites in England. The Secretary of State is aware that the workforce in Motherwell's Dalzell plate mill have been repeatedly and sorely let down by Speciality Steel, which has left the site underfunded and unable to carry out contracts. The workforce have also been let down by the SNP Government, which sold the site to those cowboys in the first place and then left the playing field. Dalzell was part of British Steel; that plate mill is the jigsaw piece that completes our steel offering in the UK. It makes sense for it to be brought back into the fold as soon as possible. Will the Secretary of State confirm to the House that he will take all necessary actions to save Dalzell and get it up and running again, ensuring that growth in every postcode includes ML1?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her advocacy on behalf of her constituents. She and I have discussed the matter several times. For colleagues who are less aware of the issue, Dalzell is a separate legal entity and company from Speciality Steel and thus separate from the full plans that we are talking about. Dalzell is still owned by the Gupta Family Group, but many of the same issues are found there. My hon. Friend knows that because that part of the business is not being run by the official receiver—it is a different set of circumstances—with any interest that we had, we

would have to establish the level of liability, and the flow of public money that would be required, given the former associations that it has. We do not have current plans to do that, but we will remain closely engaged with my hon. Friend. I know that her constituents want to be back at work, and I share their frustration, but the House should be aware that Dalzell is in a different position from the rest of SSUK.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): I wish to pass on my party's condolences to the Prime Minister and his family.

While recognising the £500 million transition fund to Port Talbot, there are real concerns that Welsh steel will not receive a fair share of the £2.5 billion steel fund. Today the Secretary of State has announced that the public acquisition of Speciality Steel will be funded from that steel fund. Can the Secretary of State reassure the Welsh steel sector that Wales will get its fair share of the steel fund following today's announcement?

Jonathan Reynolds: Yes. On both a per capita basis and on a straightforward cash basis, Wales had until fairly recently had the lion's share—the biggest allocations—from Government because of the significance of the transformation programme at Port Talbot, which remains a fundamental part of the steel sector across the UK. Being frank, it is also one of the sector's success stories: the transformation of Port Talbot is a major project supported by significant public money and significant private capital, and it is exactly the kind of transformation we are seeking in other parts of the UK. It is to the credit of the workforce at Port Talbot that they are at the forefront of this; notwithstanding the difficult issues involved in such a transformation, it is something to be proud of.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): I very much welcome the Secretary of State's statement. Does he agree that workers and communities are ultimately paying the price for the reckless conduct associated with Lex Greensill and those who championed his business model, and that this Government are now stepping in with the leadership that was previously so lacking?

Jonathan Reynolds: My hon. Friend tempts me to comment on certain issues, which I might swerve a little. He is right to say that the priority for politicians should be trying to resolve these issues and get steelworkers back to work, and anything that detracts from that or that goes in a different direction is deeply regrettable.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his responses. For businesses in Northern Ireland that rely on imported steel from large producers such as Speciality Steel, these changes create a significant risk of increasing costs, forced changes to suppliers and disruption to supply chains. Steel is a critical input for Northern Ireland, contributing to some 10% of our workforce, and the potential consequences for manufacturing, construction and engineering industries in Northern Ireland are significant. Does the Secretary of State agree that every effort must be made to ensure that Northern Ireland is not economically cut off by steel import arrangements protection for GB, and that this must not be at a cost to businesses in Northern Ireland?

Jonathan Reynolds: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that historically these plants have served a number of first-class manufacturers and engineering works in Northern Ireland, although they have not been doing so to date, as the workforce has been furloughed and the plants have not been operating. I would love to rekindle that relationship and see these issues resolved—that is the focus of the statement and the decisive action that the Government have taken.

On the wider complexities of steel imports and the movement of steel products between Northern Ireland and the island of Great Britain, that is a complex situation that reflects the Windsor agreement. There are things, particularly in the reset of the Government's relationship with the EU, that Northern Ireland stands to gain from, and this is one of those areas. Again, that is a priority for the Government to resolve.

Robert Hamill Inquiry Report

4.33 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Bryant): I too pass on my condolences to the Prime Minister on the death of his father. I am enormously grateful to the First Minister of Northern Ireland, Michelle O'Neill, who texted me a few moments ago to pass on her heartfelt sympathy as well. I am sure that all hon. Members will want to share in that.

With permission, I will make a statement on the Robert Hamill inquiry report, which is published today. I start by paying tribute to the extraordinary grace and honour that Robert Hamill's family have shown in the 29 years since he was murdered. It is hard enough to grieve the death of a loved one; it is even harder to grieve a loved one who was violently assaulted and brutally murdered; it is even worse to grieve a loved one without clear and coherent answers about the circumstances of their death for years and years. Many victims of the troubles have told me of the pain that gnaws away at them because they have no answers. Today will be particularly difficult for Robert's family, so I send them my heartfelt sympathy and, I am sure, the sympathy of the whole House.

The facts are bleak. At about 1.20 am on Sunday 27 April 1997, a 25-year-old Catholic man, Robert Hamill, a father of three, left a dance at St Patrick's hall on Thomas Street, Portadown, and walked with others towards the junction with High Street and Market Street, where Royal Ulster Constabulary officers were in a parked RUC Land Rover. There, a group of Protestants attacked Robert and left him with such injuries to the head that he never recovered consciousness, and he died in hospital 11 days later on 8 May 1997.

The inquiry is clear:

"Robert Hamill suffered head trauma either shortly after that violence broke out or a little later when...Protestant youths kicked him while he was on the ground. The trauma included axonal injury, in particular in the brain stem. We find that those injuries directly caused his death."

The inquiry refers to there being at least three blows to the head and states:

"Robert Hamill's death was murder, because those who assaulted him must have at least intended to cause serious injury to him."

The people who attacked Robert did not know him. Robert had done nothing to provoke such a vicious and violent attack. He was killed simply for being who he was. To put it bluntly, he was killed solely because he was Catholic. I cannot imagine the pain felt by his family and his companions that day, who were clearly outnumbered as they watched him lying on the pavement.

The intervening years have been plagued by delay. Following the Weston Park talks in 2001, the retired Canadian judge Justice Peter Cory examined six cases and recommended that a public inquiry be launched into Robert's death, which was then established in November 2004, chaired by Justice Sir Edwin Jowitt. He completed his work in 2011, but the Government committed not to publish the report until ongoing criminal proceedings had been exhausted. These ended on 14 June 2024 with the conviction of former RUC officer Robert Atkinson for his role in failing to properly investigate the incident and for perverting the course of

[Chris Bryant]

justice. Given the passage of time and Sir Edwin's health, a new chair was appointed: Sir John Evans, a member of the panel.

I am pleased that Sir John's report is finally published today, but I fully acknowledge the significant delay, which is through no fault of the inquiry. That delay—15 years from completion to publication—is far too long and has no doubt caused family members additional frustration and anguish. I truly regret that.

The inquiry's terms of reference did not include attributing responsibility for Robert's murder, but addresses two areas of public concern regarding the conduct of the Royal Ulster Constabulary: first, whether the officers in the Land Rover were in any way responsible for Robert Hamill's death; and, secondly, whether the subsequent investigation into his murder was inhibited by any wrongful act or omission on the part of the RUC.

The inquiry finds that although RUC Land Rover crew parked near to the outbreak of violence were distracted talking to two members of the public, this did not facilitate Robert Hamill's death. It also finds that the officers in the Land Rover were not guilty of any wrongful act or omission in relation to the death of Robert Hamill. This last point was not the unanimous view of the inquiry panel, as the former chair Sir Edwin Jowitt expressed a dissenting view that the officers were guilty of omission by not keeping watch. The report also finds that the officers did not in any way condone or collude with the attackers.

However, on the second area of public concern, the inquiry findings are disturbing. They conclude that RUC officers were guilty of wrongful omissions and that those omissions arose both at the scene and during the initial investigation between 27 April 1997 and 7 May 1997. Those omissions included, first, a failure to carry out an initial debriefing, both at the scene and immediately upon return to the police station, with multiple officers finishing their shifts or going on to other duties without recording what had happened. This had a serious and significant impact on the murder investigation, and these omissions were negligent. Secondly, there was a failure to carry out a full debriefing of all officers who had been at the scene once it became clear that Robert Hamill's injuries were life-threatening. This omission was negligent. Thirdly, there was a wrongful omission by two officers to supply relevant information in relation to an individual they had seen at the scene. This inhibited and obstructed the investigation and was, in the case of one officer, negligent, and in the case of the other, deliberate.

The inquiry finds that one RUC officer, Robert Atkinson, is guilty of a wrongful act for making a telephone call to the home of Allister Hanvey, who was present the night of the incident, which resulted in that individual destroying or putting beyond the reach of the police the clothes he had been wearing that night. That deliberately obstructed the investigation. In September and October 1997, Mr Atkinson subsequently conspired to cover up the tip-off telephone call at an important point in the murder investigation. The conspiracy amounted to an obstruction of the murder investigation and was deliberate. That conduct resulted in the conviction of Mr Atkinson in 2024 for conspiring to pervert the course of justice.

The Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, Jon Boutcher, will want to reflect on the report's findings, and I do not want to pre-empt any comment that he may make. I note that policing and justice are now devolved responsibilities, but these events happened under the Royal Ulster Constabulary. I merely say that it is especially disturbing that Mr Atkinson carried an RUC badge for years when he had so evidently and heinously failed in his duty and acted as a criminal.

The report says that there was a "catalogue of failures" by the RUC. It is difficult not to agree. The inquiry was empowered to make recommendations. Although it makes none for the Northern Ireland Office or the Government, I will make a couple of broader points. First, today is a landmark moment, and I am proud to be the Secretary of State who can finally share the report with the House, but it is also a reminder to all of us of the long shadow of the troubles and its deep and lasting effect on the people of Northern Ireland and beyond. We must never forget that many other families still wait and yearn for answers about how their loved ones were killed.

My second point is that the peace that was ushered in by the Belfast/Good Friday agreement the year after Robert's death was an extraordinary achievement. Power sharing is difficult, but we should never take that peace for granted. After all, Robert's death happened against the background of deep sectarian division. Nobody wants to return to that. That is why, to seek a more harmonious way forward, we must always double down on compromise and rise above our immediate instincts.

I thank the current and former chairs of the inquiry, Sir John Evans and the late Sir Edwin Jowitt, the Reverend Baroness Kathleen Richardson and all those who played a part in its delivery, including Paul Murphy—now Lord Murphy—who commissioned the report. I will lay a copy of the report in the Libraries of both Houses, and it will be published in full online.

This will be a difficult day for Robert Hamill's family. He would have been coming up to his 55th birthday in December—he was younger than me. He might have become a grandfather or a great uncle by now, but he was murdered just for being a Catholic. We all pay our heartfelt respects to him and his family.

I end by noting one of the final paragraphs of the report:

"The murder file is still open and to this day no one has been convicted of causing Robert Hamill's death."

I commend this statement to the House.

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

4.43 pm

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, and I echo his opening remarks. I pass on my own condolences to the Prime Minister and my deepest sympathies to the Hamill family on this most challenging of days.

The killing of Robert Hamill was a tragedy, and the Opposition condemn all heinous sectarian violence. Robert Hamill was beaten to death in his own town. His death should never have happened, and his killers should be brought to justice. His family have been waiting 29 years, and Sir Edwin Jowitt did not live to see his own report published. This inquiry took too long.

It has long been argued by some that the police did nothing to prevent Mr Hamill's murder, and yet the report found:

"In the event...we have found no wrongful act or omission which facilitated Robert Hamill's death."

The failings of the police were because of a lack of due diligence; there was no overarching conspiracy in the events that led up to his death. The report highlights police failures of investigation, which were entirely wrong. The case of Atkinson led to a conviction for perverting the course of justice, and we condemn those actions entirely. We believe that 12 months served is not enough for such a crime. Those in the RUC who shamed themselves dishonour the many thousands of officers who served with integrity, standing between bombs, bullets and civilians. It is clear that the inquiry found that this was a case of negligence and that there was no overall conspiracy in the RUC to prevent a proper investigation. Those who murdered Robert Hamill could still be walking the streets today; we find it deplorable that they have not been brought to justice.

May I take the opportunity to thank all those who have been involved in the report? I would like to ask the Secretary of State a number of questions. First, thousands of people served in the RUC in one of the most difficult policing environments imaginable. Does he agree that the vast majority of them carried out their duties with exemplary skill and bravery and deserve our thanks? Secondly, does he accept that the central finding of the report—that no officer in the Land Rover acted wrongfully—is a majority finding from which the inquiry's own chairman dissented? Further, how have the Hamill family been supported throughout the process of publication?

This is one of the last of the core inquiries to report. What is the Government's assessment of what those inquiries have collectively cost, what they have delivered and what they tell us about the inquiry model as a route to legacy truth recovery? This inquiry had cost £33 million by the time it was initially completed in 2011, and it took a further 15 years to reach the public. What lessons do the Government draw for the Omagh bombing inquiry and the inquiry into the murder of Patrick Finucane? The Finucane inquiry is already behind schedule.

How will the material gathered by the inquiry—more than 20,000 documents and evidence from 174 witnesses—be preserved? Will it be made available to the body now handling legacy cases and to the Public Record Office in Northern Ireland? Finally, do the Government consider the questions raised by the report to be closed by its publication or do they accept that there is unfinished business in relation to the Director of Public Prosecutions' role, which the family had to go to judicial review to have considered? I finish by joining the Secretary of State in condemning all sectarian violence.

Chris Bryant: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, whom I should welcome to his post. The first point I want to make is that something like 300 RUC officers were killed in the troubles. I pay tribute to the many thousands of RUC officers who did their jobs diligently in very difficult circumstances and with great courage and dedication to all communities in Northern Ireland. That is why a report such as this is so painful, including for the many RUC officers who formerly served, because they see the reputation of the organisation brought into disrepute by the actions of some.

When we read the chapter in the report and all the paragraphs about the investigations, and the failings in them, it is difficult not to put our head in our hands and ask how on earth this could be the case. There were manifest failings. As the hon. Member said, the actions of Robert Atkinson were absolutely despicable, and he has rightly been convicted.

When I recently visited the RUC memorial garden in Belfast, I was struck by how there were decades when maybe two or three, or five or six, RUC officers were killed; then there were decades when dozens and dozens were killed. Of course we have to take seriously when there are criticisms of processes and we need to ensure that we get those right. The fact that many of the recommendations for the RUC and the PSNI were made many years ago and have now been implemented is noted. There are not any particular questions or recommendations for the Government to adopt.

The hon. Member asked me about the inquiry cost. He is right that the figure was at something like £33 million and a few more since. I feel a bit conflicted, because on the one hand, in the short time that I have been Secretary of State for Northern Ireland I have met so many people who lost loved ones and have no idea what happened, but I have also met people who see the person they believe killed their brother, their husband or their father going to Marks & Spencer or going about their daily business without ever having been interrupted by the legal system at all. They find that phenomenally painful. I do want to get answers for as many people in Northern Ireland as possible. I also do not want to over-promise, because sometimes—there is an irony about this sentence—the truth is complex and nuanced and depends on whose point of view we take.

I also note the several points in the report where the inquiry panel points out that it would have been able to do more if more people had been able to provide witness statements, but lots of people did not do so because they felt that they were under threat or they were being cajoled into not doing so. All of that makes it very difficult to get to the truth. This is why I am committed to the troubles Bill, and to making sure that it delivers a legacy commission that is able to get to the truth for as many victims as possible.

I often think that one of the things that the Good Friday agreement did was bring an end to the fighting—not immediately, obviously; the hon. Gentleman has referred to the Omagh bombing—but it also meant that lots of people had to try to forget. They were effectively asked to forget what had happened in their own family lives, and they have borne the brunt of that pain for many decades, so the more we can do to provide answers, the better.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the Finucane inquiry. He will know that it is starting its processes in earnest this week. Several Governments promised an inquiry, which is why I pay tribute to my predecessor for setting it up. I hope that it will get to the answers.

The hon. Gentleman's final point was about the DPP. The report says that

"we have come to the firm view that the process by which the decision was reached to discontinue the prosecution of Res Con Atkinson was riddled with significant flaws. We have reached the clear view that it was not carried out with due diligence."

[Chris Bryant]

In fact, subsequent to the interim report, the DPP returned to its original decision to prosecute two people, and that is what led to Mr Atkinson being convicted.

Hilary Benn (Leeds South) (Lab): I begin by congratulating my right hon. Friend on his appointment as Secretary of State. This is the first chance I have had to do so, and I wish him every success for the future.

This is a shocking story of a young man, Robert Hamill, who was the victim of a sectarian murder, but also the victim of the deliberate decision of a police officer to ring up a suspect a few hours after the murder to warn him to dispose of his clothing, because it might incriminate him, rather than fulfil his duty to uphold the law, and who then lied about it. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is so important finally to tell the truth about what happened during the troubles, if reconciliation in Northern Ireland is to be progressed?

Chris Bryant: First, I warmly commend my right hon. Friend. If I can be as nice, sage, honourable, decent and gentlemanly as he in this role, I will have performed a decent task. He is absolutely right. There is another thing that is absolutely shocking here: there has never been an inquest. In fact, this is the first time that it has been declared that it was murder. That, of itself, is truly shocking. This is not the only case in Northern Ireland where no answers have been provided for individuals. He is absolutely right: the behaviour of Mr Atkinson would shock in a drama, but it is in fact the truth that he deliberately perverted the course of justice. I should say that the inquiry is keen to make the point that deliberate actions are much more blameworthy than casual omissions.

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

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for giving me early sight of the report and the statement. I want to begin by echoing his tribute to the grace with which the family of Robert Hamill have faced a wait of nearly three decades for answers. Such a lengthy delay in justice is unacceptable, especially in the face of the heinous sectarian violence that resulted in Mr Hamill's murder simply because he was a Catholic. The Secretary of State acknowledges that the delay in publication of this report was no fault of the inquiry, but because of the understandable decision to wait until proceedings that eventually resulted in the conviction of the former RUC officer, Mr Atkinson, had been concluded.

However, I remain bemused by its taking 13 years for Mr Atkinson to be convicted for his despicable acts regarding the tip-off of one of the suspects in the murder and the subsequent cover-up. That is particularly hard to understand, given that the facts relating to his criminal behaviour were clearly established long before the report was finalised in 2011. Is the Secretary of State able to shed any light on why it took 13 years for these proceedings to be concluded? Furthermore, what actions will the Government take to ensure that future inquiries do not fall foul of procedural pitfalls, to ensure that grieving families are given answers in a timely fashion?

Finally, the report identifies many failures of the Royal Ulster Constabulary with regard to negligence, a lack of due diligence and the failures of inexperienced, untrained officers; however, it also makes a number of recommendations relevant to the PSNI. As policing and justice is now a devolved matter, what role does the Secretary of State envisage for the Northern Ireland Office and himself personally in ensuring that those recommendations are implemented, and the PSNI embodies the values of accountability and transparency that all communities in Northern Ireland have a right to expect?

Chris Bryant: I am grateful for the hon. Member's comments. It is vital that all those in public office exhibit candour. That is as important for police officers as it is for anybody else, as became painfully apparent throughout the process of trying to get justice for those involved in the Hillsborough disaster. That applies equally to the PSNI as it did to the RUC. The hon. Member is right that these are now primarily matters either for the PSNI directly or for the Justice Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive, and I am sure that they will want to go through the report with a fine-toothed comb.

It is not only that nobody had said until today that this was a murder; nobody had decided on what the cause of death was until today. I urge hon. Members to read the report, because it goes in some detail into precisely what happened, and it makes for very distressing reading.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South and Mid Down) (SDLP): I thank the Minister for his very thoughtful statement. I was in sixth year in 1997, and the nightclub that Robert Hamill's killers were leaving was a haunt of mine and my classmates. I think that is why this murder remains in my memory so viscerally. It was so brutal, so sectarian, and led to so many years of injustice for the family. As happens so often, a proper exploration has uncovered collusion. That has been the case certainly not for all RUC officers, but for far too many. It is painful and difficult for society, but the Minister will know that suppression does not aid the healing and reconciliation that we need.

It is also impossible to ignore the context of that murder, and the 20 other human lives wasted around the time of the Drumcree stand-off in those years. Does the Secretary of State agree that disclosure must be properly addressed in the body that he is currently legislating for, and that it is a bleak, dead-end campaign to reopen wounds as deep as Drumcree?

Chris Bryant: I think everybody wants to condemn sectarianism, but the truth is that it is awfully easy to stir it up, in every society in the world. What is striking in the report is not only some of the terms of abuse that were shouted from one side to the other; a couple of witnesses also referred to the fact that when Robert Hamill's body was being stretchered into an ambulance, people were shouting, "I hope he dies." We need to remember the bitterness that sectarianism can instil in people's hearts, especially when people are gathered in large crowds. Anything that we can do to calm sectarianism is a really important part of my job, and that of all those involved in the politics of Northern Ireland.

The hon. Member makes a very fair point about disclosure. We will talk about the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill in a couple of weeks' time, and that is one of the issues that we will address.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): This relates directly to my constituency, so I welcome the opportunity to speak to it today. Robert Hamill's murder was a brutal and appalling crime, and my thoughts are first and foremost with his family, who have many questions, as do many families right across Northern Ireland. But the truth matters, and the truth today is clear. Paragraph 21 finds that four RUC officers

"were not aware of the assault until they got out and they did not in any way condone or collude with attackers."

Paragraph 75 concludes that

"we have found no wrongful act or omission which facilitated Robert Hamill's death."

Put simply, they did not sit idly by, they did not collude, they did not facilitate murder—something that has been hurled at them for the past 30 years.

The complaint, advanced by Rosemary Nelson, has been demolished by the inquiry, which also found that she failed to "co-operate fully" with the RUC and "did not improve the situation."

This goes to the heart of the nationalist republican legacy activism, whereby truth and the rule of law are subjective terms to be weaponised to seek to arrive at a predetermined political outcome.

More than 300 RUC officers were murdered while protecting the entire community. Will the Secretary of State now end this decades-long smear, defend these four officers and reject any attempt to rewrite history or attach collective guilt to the RUC?

Chris Bryant: Well, that was a slightly partial version of what is in the report. If the hon. Member read the whole report, I think she would come to a rather more settled position. She is absolutely right that, on the first issue that the inquiry was asked to look at—namely, whether the behaviour of the crew in the Land Rover had in some way contributed to the death—the report is absolutely clear that there was no collusion with the attackers. However, there are quite serious criticisms of the way the investigation was pursued, or was not pursued effectively. Of course, there is the additional issue of how Reserve Constable Atkinson behaved and that whole saga. I think it is best to tell the whole of the story, rather than just part of it.

I did not answer one of the questions that was asked earlier about the support for the family. I spoke very briefly to Diane over the weekend. Of course, the Northern Ireland Office has been in contact with the family throughout the process. In the end, of course, the most important thing is ensuring that the family get the answers they need.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): If people in this House are going to utter Rosemary Nelson's name, I would expect that they should also call for justice and truth in relation to her case, because—I say this in case people do not realise—she too was killed by loyalists not long after.

The report is clear, and I want to send our message of thanks and good wishes to the Hamill family, who have had to struggle for far too long for the report to be released. It is clear that there were massive failings corporately on behalf of the RUC and in terms of an individual who deliberately went about his business trying to cover up what happened to Robert Hamill. The impact of legacy is clear on the everyday workings

of policing in Northern Ireland today. That is why we have to deal with the legacy issue. Those people in this House who do not want to see prosecutions—even the opportunity for prosecutions—for what happened in the past should read this report and listen to the Hamill family today.

We need to remember the context, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said. This happened during a murderous sectarian time that all revolved around the issue of Drumcree. Will he join me in calling for everybody to take a step back, to remember what happened not that long ago, and to try to take us away from using those old issues to stir up hate and sectarianism and potentially much, much worse?

Chris Bryant: It is often very difficult, including for a well-resourced inquiry, to get to the truth. I will read out another clause of the report:

"We are left in no doubt that the decision by so many to have no recollection was by no means always spontaneous but was the result of suggestion, cajolery and in some cases threat. This has added to our difficulties."

The truth is that sometimes sectarianism leads not just to the murder, but to the cover-up. That is why I am very keen to ensure that we do everything we possibly can to diminish that. There is a Purcell anthem that I used to have to sing a lot when I was at school and at university. It includes the line:

"Let your moderation be known unto all men".

Perhaps that should be our motto.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I should declare that in a previous life I was one of the defence counsel in the murder case that arose from the shocking death of Robert Hamill. So there was a murder trial and there was a due verdict of not guilty, and we should not forget that either.

May I ask the Secretary of State, after £33 million and more, what is it that we now know from this report that we did not know from the public murder trial, and that we did not know from the public appearances and reporting and trial of Robert Atkinson? We have spent over £33 million, and most of what is in this report was already in the public domain.

Perhaps what was not in the public domain was the fact that the audacious, constant propaganda that the police officers had colluded in the murder has now been wholly debunked, and the report quite properly finds that they did no wrongful act or omission facilitating that murder. That is a big price to pay to arrive at that conclusion and the conclusion that there was no collusion, contrary to the constant refrain of some for almost 30 years. I welcome the fact that that at least has been laid to rest.

Chris Bryant: First, just because nobody has been convicted of murder does not mean that a murder was not committed. Indeed, one of the most painful aspects of all of this is that, clearly, as this report finds for the first time, there was a murder. The cause of death was at least three beatings to the head that Robert Hamill received—possibly two or more being kicks to the head when he was already lying on the ground, and possibly a third from a bottle. It beggars belief that in this country we can all decide that somebody was murdered but nobody ends up facing justice for the murder. I suppose that is one of the pains that arises in many of the cases that we deal with here.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State very much for his answers. For grieving families, the absence of answers prolongs the pain and grief. There is also, of course, a wider public interest in ensuring that legacy cases, such as Robert Hamill's, are dealt with both efficiently and fairly. But does the Secretary of State appreciate that inquiries and investigations that last for decades continue to place significant demands on police time and resources, and require large sums of public money, and that complex legacy cases can take time to investigate properly, and due process must always be respected?

Chris Bryant: Yes, of course I recognise that, and in addition there is the problem that for the families and for all the witnesses and the many other people, such as those who were there that night, there is the anguish of going through that process—through multiple legal processes, judicial reviews, considerations of the Director of Public Prosecutions, the original report by Justice Cory and then the eventual launching of the inquiry. All of that of course has an emotional cost as well as a financial cost.

I do not want to set the financial cost aside; that is of course a consideration for Government, especially at a difficult time fiscally. But in the end we want to get as many answers as possible for people. I say this as much for the families of the 300 or so RUC officers, or the 1,100 members of the security services who were killed in Northern Ireland, and the families who were killed in whatever set of circumstances in Northern Ireland. That is why I want to make sure that the legacy commission really is able to do the job that we are setting it up to do, and that is why it is important that the troubles Bill goes through its passage.

I would just say one other thing. It is one thing for us in the British Government to be candid; I think it is also important that the Irish Government be candid. That is why it is such an important part of the process that we are undergoing with the troubles Bill that when I have spoken to my opposite numbers in Dublin, Helen McEntee and Jim O'Callaghan, they have been very keen to say that they want to make sure that their necessary legislation, which enables them to participate in the process of providing answers for people and giving information, happens in lockstep with ours so that they will be implemented at the same time. If we can get the two Governments working together to provide answers, there will be many more families who will have—I hate the word “closure”, but they will at least reach a point when they are able to understand that this moment is done.

Point of Order: Rectification Procedure

5.10 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Richard Tice on a point of order in connection with the code of conduct to rectify a failure to declare.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I would like to apologise to the House for my failure to declare an interest when participating in a Westminster Hall debate on 22 June 2026, on the topic of pro-Israel influence on UK politics and democracy. When speaking in the debate, I failed to declare the relevant interest, which was that I had been on a visit to Israel between 26 and 30 September 2025, funded by Reform Friends of Israel. Although the trip is properly recorded in my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, I should have declared it during the speech. That was a breach of the rules and I apologise to this good House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for his point of order. There will be no further points of order on that issue.

BILLS PRESENTED

BARBERS AND HAIRDRESSERS (REGISTRATION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Vikki Slade, supported by Ian Roome, Mike Reader, Mr Jonathan Brash, Tom Gordon, Martin Wrigley, Clive Jones, Sarah Champion, Dr Simon Opher, Christine Jardine, Mr Will Forster and John Lamont, presented a Bill to make provision for the compulsory registration of barbers and hairdressers in England.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 27 November, and to be printed (Bill 147).

RURAL COMMUNITIES (PUBLIC SERVICES AND ENERGY) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Tim Farron, supported by Sarah Dyke, presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to carry out a review of the adequacy of local government funding for rural communities, and to require that review to consider the additional costs of delivering public services in sparsely populated areas; to require the Secretary of State to carry out a review of access to healthcare services for rural communities, and to require that review to consider the availability of radiotherapy treatment in rural areas; to require the Secretary of State to publish guidance for healthcare providers and others on reducing inequalities in access to health services between rural and urban areas; to make provision about energy efficiency standards for new homes in rural communities; to require the Secretary of State to carry out a review of support available to households in rural areas affected by fuel poverty and reliance on off-grid heating; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 October, and to be printed (Bill 148).

PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT
(COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Ben Maguire presented a Bill to require housing developers to construct any planned community infrastructure before commencing construction of housing with which the planned community infrastructure is associated; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 5 March 2027, and to be printed (Bill 149).

**SOVEREIGN GRANT BILL:
ALLOCATION OF TIME**

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Sovereign Grant Bill:

Timetable

(1) (a) Notwithstanding the practice of the House as to the intervals between stages of a Bill brought in upon a financial resolution, proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken at today's sitting in accordance with this Order.

(b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(c) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

(2) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(3) (a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chair shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(4) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chair or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply:

(a) any Question already proposed from the chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment, new Clause or new Schedule selected by the Chair or Speaker for separate decision;

(d) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded;

and shall not put any other questions, other than the question on any motion described in paragraph (10)(a) of this Order.

(5) On a Motion so made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chair or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(6) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(d) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chair or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(7) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(e) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chair shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

Miscellaneous

(8) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on the Bill.

(9) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(10) (a) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

(b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.

(c) Such a Motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(11) (a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(12) The start of any debate under Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) to be held on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall be postponed until the conclusion of any proceedings on that day to which this Order applies.

(13) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(14) (a) Any private business which has been set down for consideration at a time falling after the commencement of proceedings on this Order or on the Bill on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall, instead of being considered as provided by Standing Orders or by any Order of the House, be considered at the conclusion of the proceedings on the Bill on that day.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to the private business so far as necessary for the purpose of securing that the business may be considered for a period of three hours.—(*Shaun Davies.*)

Sovereign Grant Bill

Second Reading

5.12 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill relates to the sovereign grant that Parliament has provided to support the official duties of the monarch and the work of the royal household. The Bill implements the conclusions of the recent royal trustees' review of that sovereign grant. In doing so, it resets the grant level for the next financial year, giving effect to the commitment of successive Governments and the expectation of the royal household for a reduction in the level of funding following the completion of the Buckingham Palace reservicing programme, which keen Members will have heard about on the news this morning on the back of the discovery of some historical documents.

The Bill also makes targeted improvements to the statutory framework for this funding, introducing limited flexibilities to ensure that funding levels remain appropriate even in exceptional circumstances. This will make it easier to respond where funding would otherwise become inappropriately low or inappropriately high.

To support the monarch's official duties, the sovereign grant funds the staff, official travel, property maintenance and essential services for the sovereign to fulfil their unique constitutional role. That role extends beyond ceremonial functions: it includes hosting heads of state, supporting diplomatic engagements, representing the United Kingdom overseas, and strengthening our relationships across the Commonwealth and the world. These activities support the UK's interests, including trade, investment and security. At home, the grant supports the significant role of the sovereign and the wider royal household, from recognising charitable and voluntary service to bringing communities together across the United Kingdom.

Since 2012, the amount of the sovereign grant has been determined through a statutory framework established by Parliament in the Sovereign Grant Act 2011. That framework requires the annual grant amount to be calculated by reference to the previous year's expenditure and a percentage of the profits of the Crown Estate—an independent public corporation whose net revenue profits are returned to the Exchequer. To ensure that funding levels remain appropriate, the 2011 Act requires the royal trustees—the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Keeper of the Privy Purse—to conduct regular reviews.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister is setting the scene incredibly well. He is right to underline that the British monarchy has clearly been a source of stability across the world, and to say that its unity remains irreplaceable in a world full of division. We acknowledge the ongoing need to review and adjust the sovereign grant, but does he agree that it is vital that the monarchy remains appropriately funded? When he sums up, can he assure us that the monarchy will be funded to effectively fulfil its duty to this country, the great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Torsten Bell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his tribute to the monarchy. His description of what he would like to see in the setting of the sovereign grant reflects exactly what has to take place. As I was just explaining, the three trustees are required to take into account the funding required to deliver the function that we all want our monarch to deliver.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Reform): There is what might be an important innovation in the text of this year's sovereign grant annual report and accounts, which the Bill refers to and which the Minister is describing. Usually, the description of the sovereign's role includes the term "defender of the faith", but that term does not appear in this year's report and accounts. Instead, the monarch is referred to as the "Supreme Governor of the Church of England".

That is good. The report also says that he

"protects the space for Faith within the multi-faith nation."

That is an admirable ambition, but I invite the Minister to confirm that no alteration to the monarch's role is implied in that change. If there were to be such an alteration, would it be debated properly in Parliament, rather than introduced quietly through these sorts of official reports?

Torsten Bell: The hon. Member has shown interest in this topic over many years, in a lot of different environments. This is a question of "and", rather than "or". As he says, the document spells out that His Majesty is the Supreme Governor of the Church of England. I encourage him to go on to the royal family's website, where he will see the language about the King being the defender of the faith very prominently displayed. I hope that gives him the reassurance that he seeks.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): We are extremely fortunate to have a monarchy, particularly this monarchy. Since the reign of George III, the profits from the Crown Estate have accrued to the Treasury; in return, the institution of the monarchy receives a grant, which we are debating today. Part of that is an annually determined proportion of the profits. However, for things other than exceptional expenditure, such as on Buckingham Palace, the institution presumably requires some sort of stability and certainty about the receipts necessary to carry out its functions. Is it logical for the grant to be a proportion of profits, which will inevitably vary year by year, because they are a commercial matter?

Torsten Bell: I think everybody in this House will agree with the thrust of what the right hon. Gentleman successfully argues. A royal household with an important role, both as the sovereign, and in maintaining an estate of grade I listed monuments, needs certainty about its income. It is not for me to defend the previous Government, but the 2011 Act provided two bases for funding. The first is the mechanism that he mentioned, relating to a proportion of the profits of the Crown Estate. The second is a proviso that there be no fall, from year to year, in the amount of the grant. That is to provide exactly the stability that he talks about. That is why we are taking forward this primary legislation, with that dual lock. The reduction this year is purely to take into account the bringing to an end of the Buckingham Palace 10-year repair project. The legislation then provides

an ongoing commitment to the royal household and the monarch that the grant will remain at next year's level, at least. I hope that offers the right hon. Gentleman reassurance.

As I was saying, a key point of context is that Parliament agreed a temporary uplift to the grant from 2017-18 to 2026-27 to fund the Buckingham Palace reservicing programme. That was a major 10-year investment to modernise ageing infrastructure, replace critical electrical and mechanical systems, and safeguard the long-term future of one of the nation's most historic buildings. As that programme nears completion, it is time for the level of funding to be reassessed. Earlier this year, the then royal trustees completed the latest review and considered both the royal household's projected expenditure and the Crown Estate's projected revenues for the period from 2027 to 2032. The trustees concluded that with the Buckingham Palace reservicing programme nearing completion, the exceptional funding requirements that justified that temporary uplift no longer exist. They therefore recommended that the sovereign grant should fall from £137.9 million in 2026-27 to £99.9 million in 2027-28. That represents a reduction of almost £38 million, or more than a quarter.

At the same time, the trustees recognised that the royal household continues to face operational pressures in delivering what we all think of as crucial work. The recommended amount of funding will enable the household to address a maintenance backlog that was exacerbated by the pandemic, and to replace ageing digital infrastructure to strengthen cyber-security. The grant provided for by this Bill ensures value for money for taxpayers, and that the royal household can continue to discharge its crucial functions effectively.

This Bill delivers a fair and proportionate funding settlement. It reduces the amount of the sovereign grant, following the completion of a major capital programme; it improves the resilience and sustainability of the statutory framework established in 2011, while maintaining parliamentary oversight; and it ensures that the sovereign grant can continue to fulfil its core purpose, which is supporting the official duties of the monarch and maintaining the occupied royal palaces on behalf of the nation. On that basis, I commend this Bill to the House.

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

5.21 pm

Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank the Minister for his speech. This follows a recent debate on ways and means that his colleague the Exchequer Secretary had with my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild). I do not wish to repeat the points that were made on that occasion.

His Majesty's official Opposition are supportive of this Bill. As the Minister laid out, the 2011 settlement has run its course; it did well for its time, but some aspects of it were due for reconsideration. As he said, the recent significant programme of upgrades to royal residences for public purposes has now reached its conclusion—I think this year is the final year of the additional funds—so it is timely for us to look for a change in structure. I thank the Minister's colleague the Exchequer Secretary, because on the 11th of this month,

he wrote in reply to questions from my colleague, answering questions about some of the points that we may get into in detailed consideration of the Bill.

One of the substantial changes of principle in this Bill is that the ongoing ratchets that were effectively put in place by the 2011 Act have essentially become a backstop of £99.9 million. In his answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) about potential variability, the Minister has given us some confidence about the ability to plan; we know that there will not be an absolute reduction. However, questions remain about extraordinary circumstances in which the Treasury would be able to reduce the settlement in any one year. I think that the Liberal Democrats will be asking that question in reverse—about changes to the percentage that may occur—but those are matters that we can discuss in Committee.

His Majesty's official Opposition recognise the tremendous work that His Majesty the King and the royal family do on behalf of our nation. We understand the power that that provides our nation with in our international relations, and the comfort that it gives to the people of this nation, and we support the Second Reading of this Bill.

5.23 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): My sense of patriotism does not come from a flag, an anthem or the royal family. Instead, my patriotism comes from things like our national health service; movements such as that of the Levellers, who were committed to popular sovereignty, extended suffrage, equality and religious tolerance; and how Britain stood up to and defeated the evil of fascism, both abroad during the second world war and at home in places like Cable Street, where Jewish residents, Irish dockers, trade unionists, socialists and others united to stop the British Union of Fascists movement from marching through Jewish neighbourhoods. That is the sort of patriotism I love.

I have the utmost respect for any citizen who believes that the royal family is a fundamental part of British life. I have no issues with that opinion; people are entitled to it, but it is simply not one that I share. There were many reasons why I joined the Labour party. One was to change—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is expecting this, but it is important that he focuses his remarks on the Sovereign Grant Bill, and not wider issues to do with the monarchy, patriotism or why he joined the Labour party.

Brian Leishman: I will just put a red pen—a very dark red pen, obviously—through some of the comments that I wished to make. I will accelerate my remarks. It is clear that we are a nation of persistent inequality. I fully appreciate that the role of the royal family is way down the list of pressing issues that my Government have to deal with, but when looking at the intense suffering that millions of people are experiencing, I cannot help but feel that the sovereign grant money could and should be directed elsewhere, and not to a family worth an estimated £21 billion.

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

5.26 pm

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Liberal Democrats understand the purposes of this Bill and accept some of the Government's conclusions about how the grant needs to change, but we continue to be concerned about transparency. It is important to make it clear at the start that the sovereign grant provides no personal income to the King or Queen or any member of the royal family; the funding is tied entirely to the running of the institution. We recognise that the household's budget has increased, but the bulk of that increase is earmarked for a maintenance backlog across the royal palaces, green infrastructure, and cyber-security in an increasingly hostile international landscape. We agree that it is right for the grant to be reset now that the Buckingham Palace programme has finished. However, taxpayers will rightly have questions about where and, importantly, who this money goes to. The Government must ensure that not a penny of this grant goes to Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, who disgraced his title in office —

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I reiterate that we are going to stick to the scope of the Sovereign Grant Bill, which is very specifically only about the amount of the sovereign grant and how it is to be determined in future years. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the grant goes to the King.

Bobby Dean: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will move directly on to our amendment, which would insert a new subsection stopping the royal trustees from proposing any future increase to the percentage of Crown Estate profit used in the grant formula unless three conditions are met first: the National Audit Office must be commissioned to carry out a value-for-money assessment of the proposed change—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Apologies, and I appreciate that I am now leaping to my feet with monotonous regularity, but it would be more appropriate for the amendment to be discussed in Committee than on Second Reading.

Bobby Dean: Clearly, I have been very well briefed. I think my comments at the beginning were probably sufficient. We understand the purpose of the Sovereign Grant Bill. We have some concerns about transparency, but I will return to those later.

5.28 pm

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): As I said during the ways and means debate last week, I welcome the Government's decision to bring forward this legislation to make it possible for the sovereign grant to be reduced in future if necessary, and to return any unspent grant more quickly. I am grateful to the Exchequer Secretary for his letter this morning, which covered some of the points that I made in that debate. Today's Bill feels like a missed opportunity, especially as a number of issues surrounding the grant remain to be addressed by the Government.

The first issue is the link between the grant and the profits of the Crown Estate. Members will know that the Crown Estate commands a massive £16 billion portfolio, owning much of our coastline and the corresponding seabed, but it is not the private property of the monarch, nor do the revenues from the estate belong to them. In fact the Crown Estate is quite separate from the monarchy, and operates to generate revenue for the Treasury. The implication of the current arrangement is that the monarch forgoes his profits from the Crown Estate in return for a payment of a percentage via the sovereign grant, yet all the profits are public funds. That is an odd form of indexation, and raises the question of why the grant is not based on the needs of the monarchy or its costs. It would have been better if the Bill broke the link to the Crown Estate and gave power to the royal trustees to decide the appropriate figure, based on need.

That raises the second question of how the grant should be set. I believe that it should be done on an annual basis, and that it is important for the funding of the monarchy to be transparent and open for MPs to debate. All public funds should rightly be open to scrutiny and parliamentary oversight. On numerous occasions I have tried to table questions about these issues, only to be told that this is not something for Parliament to discuss. That must change, and that is why I will support amendment 1.

The Bill calls for a substantial increase in the grant, and a rise from 12% of the Crown Estate profits to 20.5%. However, the royal family is smaller than it was in 2011, when the grant was first introduced, and the King and the Prince of Wales are said to favour a slimmed-down monarchy. It would appear that the anticipated increase to £99.9 million is not based on any assessment of need, and I should appreciate it if the Minister explained exactly how we have arrived at a figure that is 322% higher than it was when it was first introduced in 2012. Even allowing for inflation and the building maintenance programme that has been mentioned, the proposed grant is well over twice the real value of its starting point. As I mentioned during the ways and means debate, there are also some anomalies when we look at the monarch's wider financial arrangements. Why, for example, is no account taken of the profits of the Duchy of Lancaster when the level of the sovereign grant is being set?

Ideally, Madam Deputy Speaker—I can see that you are very keen to bring me to book—we should have before us a Bill to ensure that the amount of the sovereign grant is appropriate to the relative needs of the monarch, and that Members of Parliament are not restricted to just approving a new percentage figure once every five years, via an arbitrary and unnecessary link to the Crown Estate. The Bill is, in my view, a missed opportunity to modernise the monarchy. I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments.

5.32 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): I thank Members on both sides of the House for their contributions to the debate. I thank, in particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) for his engagement in the ways and means debate. I was glad to be able to write to him and to the Opposition in the intervening days to clarify a few points and, I hope, expand on some of the information that I gave during that debate.

Let me briefly touch on the headlines of the three things that the Bill is doing; I will then deal with the points that have been raised, and will wrap up in good time. First, the Bill resets the level of the sovereign grant to reflect the fact that the exceptional funding requirement associated with the Buckingham Palace reservicing programme is coming to an end. Secondly, it establishes a revised mechanism for calculating the grant in future years. Thirdly, it introduces limited powers to adjust the grant in exceptional circumstances—powers that have already been discussed in our proceedings—including circumstances in which funding would otherwise become inappropriately high. The Government believe that, taken together, these changes amount to a measured and sensible reform.

I now turn to some of the points raised. My hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) made a valuable contribution. I would have enjoyed hearing more of it, but I understand that he had to keep within scope, and I will ensure that I do so too, Madam Deputy Speaker. His final point was that he does not think it is appropriate for this sum of £99.9 million to go to the royal family. It is worth clarifying that this grant is not for the family's personal purposes, but to enable His Majesty the King and the working members of the royal family to carry out their official duties on behalf of all of us and of the country.

Turning to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean), I look forward to debating the proposed amendment in more detail in Committee. I thank the Liberal Democrats and the official Opposition for their support and engagement on the Bill.

If I understood my hon. Friend the Member for Poole correctly, his key question is: why is the grant set relative to the profits from the Crown Estate at 20.5%, rather than the needs of the household? I reassure him that the key thing is the needs of the household, rather than the figure of 20.5%. The way the trustees arrive at the relevant figure is via a bottom-up assessment of what is required to enable the royal household to carry out its duties on our behalf. It starts not with the relevant percentage of the Crown Estate profits, but instead with the specific needs and requirements of the monarchy.

On my hon. Friend's specific point about the increase in the sovereign grant over recent years, he is right to point out that it is set to increase by more than inflation, but the trustees interrogated a number of reasons for that when the £99.9 million grant was determined. They include, for example, an £11.7 million addition for a 10-year programme to replace the gas heating systems at Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle as part of

the royal household's clean energy transition; £4.3 million to modernise ageing digital infrastructure and strengthen cyber-security, and replace some legacy IT systems, some of which are over 20 years old; and £11.5 million for other cost increases such as on utilities, travel, housekeeping, equipment and professional services.

I do take and understand my hon. Friend's point about inflation, but I point out that the grant will in effect be frozen—in cash terms—throughout the next five-year period. That goes to the point made by the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) about the stability of the royal household's finances. It also goes some way to explaining why the Government do not think that coming back each year would be the most appropriate and efficient way to set the grant. For those seeking to deliver value for money for the taxpayer, particularly with long-term capital expenditure, via the sovereign grant, it is much easier to do so when it is possible to plan on a long-term basis.

Jim Shannon: The royal family have buildings, which are of some age, all over the country, and by their nature there is deterioration due to their size, the heating, the roofs, the way the buildings are and the length of time they have been in existence. Does the Minister agree that, when it comes to the responsibility of the royal family to look after these buildings, further consideration must be given to those that are showing years—maybe hundreds of years—of deterioration?

Dan Tomlinson: Yes, I agree with the hon. Member on that point. These grade I listed buildings and scheduled ancient monuments are a very significant part of our national story and, for many, of our national identity. On his point about the quality of the estate, I can tell the House that independent surveys have found that 52% of the estate was at the target condition in 2020, but that had fallen to 38% by 2025.

To conclude, the question before us is a practical one: do we wish to leave in place a framework that no longer properly reflects the end of the exceptional reservicing expenditure on the palace; or do we wish to put in place a revised framework that resets the grant, improves flexibility and preserves the ability of the grant to fulfil its core purpose? The Government's view is that the right course is the latter. These measures are targeted, proportionate and deliver value for money for taxpayers. They improve the existing framework to the sovereign grant so that it continues to operate, I believe, as Parliament intended. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Committee of the whole House (Order, this day).

Sovereign Grant Bill

Considered in Committee (Order, this day)

[Ms NOKES in the Chair]

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

Clause 1

AMOUNT OF SOVEREIGN GRANT FOR THE FINANCIAL
YEAR 2027-28

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

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

Amendment 1, in clause 2, page 2, line 20, at end insert—

“(3) Section 6 of the Sovereign Grant Act 2011 is amended as follows.

(4) After subsection (4) insert—

“(5) The Royal Trustees may not make any proposals to increase the percentage specified in Step 1 (as amended by Section 2 of the Sovereign Grant Act 2026) for determining the amount of the Sovereign Grant, unless—

- (a) they have commissioned the National Audit Office to undertake a value for money assessment of the proposed change, and
- (b) the National Audit Office’s report has been laid before both Houses of Parliament, and
- (c) a motion approving the change has been debated and approved by resolution of the House of Commons.”

This amendment would ensure that any future increase to the percentage of Crown Estate profit used to calculate the Sovereign Grant is subject to independent assessment and an affirmative vote in the House of Commons.

Clause 2 stand part.

Clauses 3 and 4 stand part.

5.41 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): I will turn briefly to each of the short clauses in the Bill.

Clause 1 gives effect to the central purpose of the Bill. It sets the amount of the sovereign grant for the financial year 2027-28 at £99.9 million. In doing so, it resets the level of the grant following the completion of the Buckingham Palace reservicing programme. As that programme nears completion, the temporary funding associated with it is no longer required. Both the previous Government and this Government recognised that the level of the grant should therefore be reset and that legislation would be necessary to achieve that outcome. That is what clause 1 does: it establishes a grant of £99.9 million for 2027-28, reflecting the conclusions of the 2026 royal trustees review. The practical effect, therefore, is that funding falls from £137.9 million in this financial year to £99.9 million in 2027-28.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Chair. I desperately tried not to intervene at all, but I could not stop myself. I was on the Modernisation Committee when it had the opportunity to visit

Buckingham Palace to see some of the regeneration work being done. Does the Minister feel as reassured as I do that the renovation work was done as efficiently and practically as possible, bringing in apprentices from elsewhere—I do not think any of them came from Harlow, unfortunately—to ensure it was successful?

Dan Tomlinson: My hon. Friend is right to highlight that the works on Buckingham Palace over the past 10 years have been carried out with efficiency and effectiveness. In fact, the National Audit Office took a look at the programme of work and was able to commend it for its effective use of taxpayer money, which is of course very important. Clause 1 delivers, therefore, the intended reduction in funding following the completion of that work, and implements the conclusions of the royal trustees review to establish a new baseline for future years.

Having reset the grant for 2027-28, clause 2 turns to the framework that will determine grant funding in future years. The grant has, since 2012, been linked to the performance of the Crown Estate. That underlying principle remains unchanged by the Bill. Clause 2 updates the percentage of Crown Estate profits used within that calculation, so that the framework remains appropriate after the grant has been reset through that bottom-up calculation. It sets the relevant percentage at 20.5%. Returning to conversations we had on Second Reading, I want to reassure Members that that figure is not arbitrary. It comes directly from the conclusions of the June 2026 royal trustees review, which assessed both the royal household’s expected expenditure requirements and the Crown Estate’s forecast revenues over the period 2031-32.

Clause 3 introduces targeted safeguards to ensure that the funding framework can continue to operate effectively in exceptional circumstances. This is to ensure that where royal trustees conclude that the amount produced by the statutory formula would result in the sovereign grant reserve falling below 10% of annual expenditure or exceeding 50% of annual expenditure, and where the existing framework can adequately correct that outcome, the trustees must explain that conclusion in their annual report and identify the new amount they believe would be appropriate. The Treasury must then implement that through regulations. This reform allows greater flexibility to prevent reserves becoming either too large or too small, and it means that action can be taken before reserve levels move outside of a sustainable range, rather than waiting until existing statutory mechanisms have been triggered.

The second mechanism is a limited power to increase the grant during a financial year in genuinely exceptional circumstances, and is intended as an emergency power. It can only be used when unforeseen circumstances arise during a financial year that cannot be reasonably addressed through the normal annual funding process. Clause 4 contains standard provisions relating to commencement and the short title of the Bill; I commend this and all other clauses to the Committee.

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

Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank the Minister for his clear exposition of the Bill’s clauses. He emphasised the importance of the 2026 royal trustees’

review. The interesting thing is that it is their forecast of their needs over the next five years on which a lot of the mechanism rests. Notwithstanding some comments made by Government Back Benchers, a lot of the intention of the Bill is about financial restrictions on expenditure, rather than there being excess expenditure in the future. I am grateful for the Minister's letter to my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper); in his summing up, will the Minister give a bit more comfort and clarity on some of those matters?

If I am right, the £99.9 million is the estimate of what is required this year, based on a review of what the forecast requirements may be through to 2031-32. Will the Minister explain how those financial assessments were made? What discount rate was used to work out what the estimates might be? I am not questioning it, and I do not need a precise figure; what I am looking for is some comfort from the Minister that he feels that those financial projections, that model and the work of the trustees give him adequate confidence in the baseline of £99.9 million. That leads, in turn, to why we have 20.5% variability over the next five years.

In the Minister's response to my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway, I was also interested to hear about the use of other income. In his letter, the Minister said:

"The Household forecasts that this income will increase by around 25% over the review period, based on recent performance, detailed modelling and increased visitor capacity... If income were lower than forecast, there is no expectation that the Grant would increase above £99.9 million per year."

Can the Minister confirm that, essentially, the other income is being treated as supplementary to what we see as the duty of the sovereign grant? I would be grateful to the Minister for reconfirming what he put in his letter.

In clause 3, I am interested in proposed new section 6(5) to the Sovereign Grant Act 2011, stating that the reserve fund will be:

"no lower than 10% and no higher than 50%".

What is of interest there is the duty to change the amount of the sovereign grant. There is an issue about to what extent that reserve, at 10% to 50%, is going to cover reasonable expectations of expense. That gets to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway made earlier about long-term plans. If significant capital expenditures are due, then the reserve, by its very nature, will be quite variable during the period. I would like some comfort from the Minister that the range of 10% to 50%—which sounds, on face value, to be reasonable—was correct in the modelling.

There is just one slight concern about the Treasury's thinking on this. When my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) asked about powers to adjust the grant between reviews and the circumstances in which they might be used, the answer from the Treasury was:

"These powers are intended for exceptional circumstances and are not expected to be used routinely",

which, of course, is the definition of exceptional. However, the letter does then go on to talk about major fire, flood and so on, saying that in those circumstances,

"Any adjustment would require Parliamentary approval through secondary legislation."

Could the Minister advise on whether or not that approval will be subject to the affirmative procedure? I think that other Members may want to raise that as well.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Liberal Democrats support the thrust of the Bill. We understand why the royal household budget has increased and agree that it is right for the grant to be reset now that the Buckingham Palace programme has finished. However, we remain concerned about transparency and have put forward an amendment to that effect.

Our amendment would insert a new subsection that would stop the royal trustees proposing any future increase to the percentage of Crown Estate profit used in the grant formula unless three conditions are met first. The National Audit Office must be commissioned to carry out a value-for-money assessment of the proposed change; that NAO report must be laid before both Houses; and finally, the House of Commons must debate and approve the change by resolution.

This contrasts with the Bill as drafted, which sets the figures straight into primary legislation on the strength of the royal trustees' own conclusions, with no separate independent check built in for the next time that the percentage is revisited. That matters because it is the royal trustees who produce that report—the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Keeper of the Privy Purse. In other words, the people proposing the change are marking their own homework, with no independent body or vote required to test whether it represents good value for the taxpayer.

Our amendment is not about opposing the grant or blocking today's readjustment, which the Liberal Democrats accept is right now that the reserving works are complete. Instead, it is about ensuring that if a percentage increase is proposed again in the future, taxpayers get an independent, NAO-assessed value-for-money check, with their elected representatives getting an actual vote on it, rather than the change simply following through the trustees' own formula.

To conclude, the Liberal Democrats believe that greater transparency and independent scrutiny of taxpayer money must be built into the system for the future, not treated as optional, and that that is best guaranteed by external checks, not simply taking the Government's word for it.

Dan Tomlinson: I thank the Opposition spokespeople for their questions and comments.

Turning first to the questions from the spokesperson for the official Opposition, the OBR forecasts for inflation, interest rates and so on were used as the underlying basis for the projections. To the extent that Members across the House support the OBR and its independent forecasting duties, I hope that they would support the royal household using those forecasts.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about the reserve, the household previously aimed to maintain reserves of at least 5% of annual expenditure. This legislation formalises a slightly higher reserve at 10% as the floor, with 50% being the ceiling. It is our judgment that that is reasonable. Of course, 50% is a significant reserve.

[Dan Tomlinson]

The hon. Gentleman asked what happens to the reserve. Of course, it can be drawn down on in times when the royal household faces significant in-year financial costs. The first reaction of the Treasury and the royal trustees would not be to come to the House to ask for a vote to increase the expenditure in the case of additional in-year costs. Instead, it would be hoped that capital programmes could be smoothed out over time, and that the flexibility allowed by the reserve could be drawn on.

The hon. Gentleman asked specifically whether the secondary legislation in the event of changes would be subject to the affirmative or negative procedure in the House. I can confirm that if the percentage were to go up, it would be subject to the affirmative procedure, and we would therefore have the option to debate and discuss. If the percentage were to go down, my understanding is that it would be subject to the negative procedure.

I am grateful to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for raising the important issues of transparency, accountability and value for money. However, it is the Government's view that the Liberal Democrat amendment is not necessary under the existing framework. Any future proposal to increase the percentage used to calculate the sovereign grant would already require a published report from the trustees setting out the rationale and, as I have just said, would require the approval of the Commons through the statutory instrument being subject to the affirmative procedure, so Members of the House would have the opportunity to analyse and debate any proposed change.

The National Audit Office already plays an important role in scrutinising the sovereign grant. It audits the grant annually and can undertake value-for-money examinations where it considers that such work would assist Parliament. Indeed, it exercised these powers, as we have discussed, in relation to the Buckingham Palace resourcing programme.

The Liberal Democrat amendment would also create a unique test that is not applied to other bodies funded by the public sector. It is the Government's view that the sovereign grant is already subject to robust arrangements for accountability and scrutiny, including the managing public money principles, accounting officer oversight, National Audit Office audit and parliamentary approval for legislative changes.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 2 to 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Bill, not amended in the Committee, considered.

Third Reading

5.57 pm

Dan Tomlinson: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I thank hon. Members across the House for their contributions today as the Bill has progressed. I believe that we have done it justice, interrogating various points of contention and clarification on Second Reading and in Committee. I commend this Bill to the House.

5.58 pm

Richard Fuller: I thank the Minister for presenting the Bill, but most importantly I thank His Majesty the King for his gracious service, on behalf of all Members of this House and all people of this country and the territories and nations overseas. I hope that he will use the sovereign grant as wisely and sagaciously as his governance over us allows. I support the Bill.

5.58 pm

Bobby Dean: I thank the Minister for his comments on the Liberal Democrat amendment that was discussed earlier, and we recognise the arguments that he made in response. I support the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That at this day's sitting, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of

(1) proceedings on the Motions in the name of Sir Alan Campbell relating to

(a) Select committee chairs (period of leave),

(b) Select committees (Participation),

(c) Privileges and

(d) Standing Orders Etc. (Machinery of Government Changes)

not later than 90 minutes after the start of proceedings on the Motion for this Order; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings may continue, though opposed, until any hour, and may be entered upon after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply; and

(2) proceedings on the Motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to Israel and Palestine three hours after the start of proceedings on that Motion, or at 10.00pm, whichever is the later; proceedings may continue, though opposed, until any hour, and may be entered upon after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—
(Sir Alan Campbell.)

Select Committee Chairs: Period of Leave

[Relevant documents: First Report of the Modernisation Committee, Acting Select Committee Chairs, HC 343; Second Report of the Modernisation Committee of Session 2024-26, Virtual participation by Members in select committee meetings, HC 1827.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): We now come to the motions relating to Select Committee Chairs, period of Leave; Select Committee participation; the Committee of Privileges report; and Standing Orders, machinery of government changes, which will be debated together. There is a small error on the printed Order Paper in the motion on Standing Orders, machinery of government changes. Under section B: Related Provisions, paragraph (2), sub-paragraph (ii), the Committee names should be swapped around. A corrected version of the motion is available from the Vote Office and the online version of the Order Paper has been corrected.

6 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir Alan Campbell): I beg to move,

That:—

(1) A select committee chair who has arranged for a proxy vote under the provisions of Standing Order No. 39A (Voting by proxy) may take a period of leave.

(2) The period of leave must be continuous and must last for a minimum of one month and can last up to a maximum of seven months, with the possibility of extension, subject to the approval of the Chair of the Liaison Committee, if the proxy vote arrangements are extended.

(3) The formal leave period for a chair will begin only after the committee has appointed a replacement for the chair, to be known as the acting chair.

(4) There must be at least five sitting days' notice given of the intention to agree the appointment, or the extension, of an acting chair (not including the day on which the notice is circulated, but including the day on which the appointment or extension is to be discussed) and such notice must be in writing.

(5) The acting chair must be a member of the committee and where the chair of a committee has been elected by the whole House, the committee should appoint an acting chair who comes from the same party as the chair unless the committee decides there are compelling reasons to do otherwise.

(6) In the case of the committees specified in Standing Order No. 122B(8)(f), the acting chair must come from the official Opposition party, unless no member from that party is available or willing to act in that capacity, in which case they must come from another opposition party.

(7) In the case of an appointment of an acting chair of the Backbench Business Committee, the provisions of Standing Orders Nos 122D(1)(c) and 152J(6) shall apply to that appointment.

(8) The acting chair may exercise all the powers of the chair, including any powers already delegated to the chair by the committee.

(9) The acting chair shall be a member of the Liaison Committee during the period of the chair's leave, in place of the chair.

(10) The chair of the committee shall resume that function either at the end of the period of leave or after giving at least five sitting days' notice of their intention to return from a specified date.

(11) The leave or return of a chair and the appointment, or the extension, of an acting chair, and their temporary membership of the Liaison Committee, shall be reported to the House.

(12) In relation to Standing Order No. 122A (Term limits for chairs of select committees):

- (a) the acting chair may be a previous chair of the committee even if they have reached the term limit for chairs of select committees;
- (b) time spent as an acting chair does not count towards the term limits for chairs of select committees; and
- (c) any period of leave taken by the chair counts towards the term limits for chairs of select committees.

(13) In the case of a committee to which Standing Order No. 122B (Election of select committee chairs) applies, the committee may remove an acting chair at any point, provided that it has first agreed a motion of no confidence in that chair in accordance with the conditions set out in paragraphs (3) and (4) of Standing Order No. 122C (Resignation or removal of chairs of select committees) and any such resolution shall be reported to the House.

(14) If the committee has resolved it has no confidence in an acting chair, it may choose another member to be the acting chair in accordance with paragraphs (5), (6) and (7) of this order.

(15) If the committee is one which is specified in the resolution of the House of 19 March 2013 (as amended) relating to positions for which additional salaries are payable, the chair will continue to be paid the salary of a select committee chair during the period of leave and the acting chair, if they are a Member of the House of Commons, will be paid the salary of a select committee chair pro rata for the period during which they stand in for the chair.

(16) The Liaison Committee may issue guidance about the operation of this Standing Order.

(17) That this Order be a Standing Order of the House until the end of the present Parliament.

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

Select Committees (Participation)—

That with effect from 30 November 2026:—

(1) Select committee members may in the circumstances set out in paragraph 2 below participate in any select committee proceedings through electronic means of communication in accordance with guidance to be determined and published by the Liaison Committee, which must take into account the need for cyber security.

(2) The circumstances in which this Standing Order applies are:

- (a) when access to the estate is significantly limited or prevented entirely, or
- (b) when reasonable adjustments need to be made for an individual committee member on the grounds of health and wellbeing, following the conclusion of an assessment process as set out in the Liaison Committee guidance.

(3) A Member participating through electronic means in accordance with this Standing Order shall count towards the quorum of the Committee.

(4) The provisions of this Standing Order apply to meetings held under the provisions of Standing Order No. 137A (Select committees: power to work with other committees).

(5) This Standing Order applies to all select committees appointed under Public Business Standing Orders, the Modernisation Committee, and such other select committees as the House directs.

(6) That this Order be a Standing Order of the House until the end of the present Parliament.

Privileges—

That this House agrees with the Committee of Privileges First Report of Session 2026–27, Matter referred on 4 September 2025: Actions of the Charity Commission (HC 315), and endorses its conclusions and recommendations.

Standing Orders Etc. (Machinery of Government Changes)—

That the following amendments and related provisions be made in respect of Standing Orders:

A: Select Committees Related to Government Departments

(1) That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended in the Table in paragraph (2) as follows—

- (i) leave out items 1, 3, 14 and 19;
- (ii) insert, in the appropriate place, the following items:

“Business, Innovation, Science and Trade”	“Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade”	11
“Digital, Culture, Media and Sport”	“Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport”	11
“Science and Technology”	“Government Office for Science”	11
“Women and Equalities”	“Office for Equality and Opportunity”	11

B: Related Provisions

(2) That all proceedings of the House and of its select committees in this Parliament, including for the purposes of calculating any period under Standing Order No. 122A (Term limits for chairs of select committees)—

- (i) relating to the Business and Trade Committee shall be read and have effect as if they had been done in relation to the Business, Innovation, Science and Trade Committee;
- (ii) relating to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee shall be read and have effect as if they had been done in relation to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee; and
- (iii) relating to the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee shall be read and have effect as if they had been done in relation to the Science and Technology Committee.

C: Liaison Committee

(3) That the Resolution of the House of 4 December 2024 (Liaison Committee: Membership), be amended, in paragraph (2)—

- (i) by leaving out “Business and Trade” and inserting “Business, Innovation, Science and Trade”;
- (ii) by leaving out “Culture, Media and Sport” and inserting “Digital, Culture, Media and Sport”;
- (iii) by leaving out “Science, Innovation and Technology” and inserting “Science and Technology”.

(4) That Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee) be amended, in paragraph (6), by leaving out “Business and Trade” and inserting “Business, Innovation, Science and Trade”.

D. European Committees

(5) That the Table in paragraph (7) of Standing Order No. 119 (European Committees) be amended in respect of European Committee C, by leaving out:

- (a) “Business and Trade” and inserting “Business, Innovation, Science and Trade”;
- (b) “Culture, Media and Sport” and inserting “Digital, Culture, Media and Sport”; and
- (c) “Science, Innovation and Technology”.

E. Scrutiny of orders and draft orders

(6) That Standing Order No. 18 (Consideration of draft legislative reform orders etc.) be amended in paragraph (1), by leaving out “Business and Trade” and inserting “Business, Innovation, Science and Trade”;

(7) That Standing Order No. 141 (Scrutiny of regulatory and legislative reform orders etc.) be amended in paragraph (1), by leaving out “Business and Trade” and inserting “Business, Innovation, Science and Trade”; and

(8) That Standing Order No. 142 (Localism Act 2011, etc.: scrutiny of certain orders and draft orders) be amended in paragraph (1), by leaving out “Business and Trade” and inserting “Business, Innovation, Science and Trade”.

F. Planning: national policy statements

(9) That Standing Order No. 152H (Planning: national policy statements) be amended in paragraph (2)(a) as follows—

- (a) by leaving out “Business and Trade” and inserting “Business, Innovation, Science and Trade”;
- (b) by leaving out “Science, Innovation and Technology” and inserting “Science and Technology”.

Sir Alan Campbell: I have brought forward these motions today seeking approval for recommendations by the Modernisation Committee and the Committee of Privileges and for changes to the Standing Orders following the machinery of government changes. I will briefly address each motion.

I should make it clear that in speaking to the motions relating to the Modernisation Committee I am effectively wearing two hats—first, as the Leader of the House and, secondly, as Chair of the Modernisation Committee. I want to take this opportunity to thank all my colleagues on the Modernisation Committee for their hard work in developing these proposals. I also pay tribute to the Chairs and Members of the Liaison Committee and Procedure Committee, who fed into our work and have been supportive throughout.

Colleagues will know that virtual participation by Members in Select Committee meetings is currently not permitted. Committees routinely hear oral evidence from witnesses virtually, but Members themselves must be in the room. There are, of course, good reasons for the emphasis on in-person participation. However, when the Modernisation Committee held its consultation exercise in the autumn of 2024, it heard from people who argued for the benefits of virtual participation. The issue arose during our previous accessibility inquiry, so the Committee decided to consider the matter further. As a result, the Committee is recommending that virtual participation by Members in Select Committee meetings should be possible for limited and specific purposes. The very strong expectation, however, is that in-person participation will continue to be the default.

Let me be clear about the specific circumstances. They are, first, for business continuity reasons when access to the parliamentary estate is significantly restricted or prevented entirely; and, secondly, when reasonable adjustments need to be made for an individual Committee member on the grounds of health and wellbeing, following guidance produced by the Liaison Committee.

Although the circumstances set out by the Modernisation Committee in its report are very specific, the possibility of virtual participation is none the less a significant change. I want colleagues who are perhaps more sceptical about the value of virtual participation to be assured that the Modernisation Committee was conscious of that when it made the proposals and has worked with colleagues on the Liaison Committee to ensure that appropriate safeguards are in place. If agreed today, the motion will come into effect on 30 November. The delay is necessary to ensure that technological support is in place.

The second Modernisation Committee motion will introduce a scheme for acting Select Committee Chairs. There is currently no formal mechanism to enable a Select Committee Chair to take a period of extended leave from their role—for parental leave, for example. This situation arose on the Health and Social Care Committee last year, and although in that case the situation was handled locally, it raised a number of

procedural and practical issues. As a result, we are proposing the introduction of a new scheme to allow a Chair to take a formal period of leave and for another member of the Committee to stand in for them and have the same powers as the Chair.

We spent some time considering who would be eligible to be an acting Chair, and we decided that the acting Chair must be a member of the Committee and that for those Chairs elected by the whole House, the Committee should appoint an acting Chair who comes from the same party as the Chair, unless there are compelling reasons to do otherwise. Once again, I am grateful to colleagues on the Liaison Committee who produced detailed guidance that sets out how this will work in practice.

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): I was somewhat confused about the concept that after the period of seven months had elapsed the decision was then given to the Chair of the Liaison Committee, when the Speaker would have already deemed that that individual was entitled to leave from the House generally. I wonder whether the Leader of the House could provide clarification on why that decision was taken.

Sir Alan Campbell: The reason we need to look ahead if this change happens in a Committee is that we need to keep the issue under review. We need a clear set of rules about what will happen at the beginning, and it needs to be kept in our thoughts as we go forward. There is a similar system in place for when someone gets a proxy vote—permission needs to be given for that to continue. There are some comparisons.

The motions are temporary in nature. If the House agrees them today, they will run until the end of the current Parliament. There will be time to assess how they have worked in practice and whether the House wants to make the changes permanent. I hope that colleagues agree that both Modernisation Committee motions improve the flexibility available for Select Committees and Members, while preserving and enhancing the ability of Committees to perform their vital functions.

I turn to the motion relating to the Committee of Privileges' report into the actions of the Charity Commission. I welcome the Committee's consideration of this matter. As the Committee sets out, this report is, at its heart, about the provision of information to the House and whether it is appropriate to use the courts to prevent information from being provided. The report outlines that the Charity Commission had sought a judicial review seeking to prevent the Parliamentary Commissioner For Administration from laying a special report before the Commons. The case was referred to the Committee to consider whether, in seeking to prevent the flow of information to Parliament, the Charity Commission's action constituted a contempt of this House. As the report outlines, the obstruction of provision of information to Parliament is wholly unacceptable. The Committee concludes that the Charity Commission committed a contempt of Parliament in seeking to prevent the laying of the report.

The Committee recommended that the chief executive of the Charity Commission should apologise to the House for repeatedly saying that the commission's legal action was not intended to quash the laying of the report, when that was precisely its purpose, and that the board of the commission, which backed the legal action,

should take responsibility for the contempt and should apologise to the House. I am pleased to say that since the Committee's report was published, the Charity Commission has provided such apologies.

The Government have confidence in the leadership of the Charity Commission and are confident that the board is taking action to address the concerns raised by the Committee's report and learn lessons for its handling of similar cases going forward. The motion invites the House to agree the report and endorse its conclusions and recommendations. I hope that the House will support the motion.

Finally, I turn to the motion relating to Standing Orders following the machinery of government changes announced in July. The work of our Select Committees is extremely important, and today's changes demonstrate the value that we place on them. The motions before the House ensure that all existing Committees remain in place and are aligned to the Departments and bodies that they scrutinise. With respect to the changes on science and technology, given the abolition of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, we are reverting to the set-up that the Committee had prior to the establishment of that Department. I hope that Members will support these motions. I commend them to the House.

6.9 pm

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I support the motions in the name of the Leader of the House and thank him for his opening remarks.

The motion on privileges asks this House to agree with the findings in the report by the Committee of Privileges, of which I am the Chair, relating to the Charity Commission taking legal action to prevent the laying of two reports before Parliament by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration. Before I go further, I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), who, as Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, first brought this matter to the House's attention and moved the motion to refer it to my Committee just over a year ago, on 4 September 2025.

Our report deals with a rather technical but very important matter that concerns us all: parliamentary privilege. We must not forget that the case arose from serious complaints and allegations made against a number of charities, including the alleged concealment of child sexual abuse. The PCA reported on those complaints and made recommendations to the Charity Commission. Having concluded that the injustice had not been remedied and was not likely to be remedied, she decided to lay reports before Parliament, as was her right under section 10(3) of the Parliamentary Commissioner Act 1967.

It was not the role of my Committee to reach a judgment on the substance of the cases, and so we did not do so. Our role was to consider matters of parliamentary privilege and, in this case, the obstruction of the provision of information to Members. Before touching on the details of the case, I should acknowledge at the outset that, as the Leader of the House said, the commission has already accepted and acted on one of our recommendations. On 14 July—the day that we published our report—the chair of the Charity Commission, on behalf of the board, wrote to Mr Speaker, the Chair of PACAC and me, as Chair of the Privileges Committee,

[*Alberto Costa*]

with an unreserved apology. The chief executive officer, Mr Holdsworth, apologised in writing to Mr Speaker. The letter to me has been published on the Committee's website. I welcome the fact that the commission has finally acknowledged its error, albeit at a regrettably late stage.

I hope it will not try Members' patience if I remind them of the findings and significance of the report. Although it has seemingly technical issues at its heart, it is about the flow of information to this House and is therefore of the greatest importance to the House—to each and every one of us—and its ability to function. The Charity Commission interfered with the flow of information when it sought to prevent the PCA from laying reports before Parliament using the powers given to her in legislation.

To make matters worse, the commission refused for a very long time to accept that this was a privilege matter and persisted in its efforts to prevent publication. That was despite repeated written advice, including from Speaker's Counsel, that its legal action was improper interference with the House's right to be informed, and could not be considered by the courts as it would have entailed impeaching and questioning proceedings in Parliament, contrary to article IX of the Bill of Rights. That is deeply regrettable, especially given that the reports related to the commission's failure, as the PCA saw it, to implement properly the recommendations arising from its handling of the very serious complaints to which I referred.

At the same time as agreeing to refer the matter to my Committee, this House ordered that the PCA's reports be laid. That resolved the immediate issue: the interference with the provision of information to the House, as a result of which the courts ruled that the case was academic and the legal merits were unarguable. It remained for my Committee, however, to consider whether the behaviour of the commission was a contempt of Parliament and to come to a view on whether reports laid under section 10(3) of the 1967 Act are indeed proceedings in Parliament, as Speaker's Counsel had advised. In conducting our inquiry on behalf of this House, we took evidence from Speaker's Counsel, the PCA herself and three representatives of the commission: its then interim chair, Mark Simms; its CEO, David Holdsworth; and its head of litigation, Felix Rechtman.

Although we were grateful to all the witnesses for giving evidence, our report was highly critical of Mr Holdsworth, in particular, especially for repeatedly insisting, both in his oral evidence and elsewhere in correspondence, that it was never the commission's intention that Parliament should not see the information in the reports. The Committee could not see how that claim could be squared with the commission's pre-action letter, which specifically sought to quash the decision to provide Parliament with that information. In the light of that, we recommended that Mr Holdsworth and the board of the commission should apologise to the House. As I said, and as the Leader of the House confirmed, those apologies have now been made.

The inquiry sought to establish something that has never been explicitly considered by the courts, not even in this case, since the judge ruled that the legal merits were unarguable: namely, whether reports to be laid under section 10(3) of the 1967 Act are in fact proceedings

in Parliament. That is crucial to the rights of Parliament, since article IX of the Bill of Rights confers on proceedings in Parliament protection from being

“impeached or questioned in any court or place out of Parliament.”

That is one of our most foundational constitutional principles. If such a report is a proceeding in Parliament, any attempt to obstruct its laying could be a contempt of Parliament.

The Committee found that such reports were intimately connected to the House and were therefore proceedings in Parliament, and so covered by article IX. It consequently found that any attempt to prevent the laying of a paper before one or both Houses was capable of being a contempt, and that in this particular case the commission had clearly committed such a contempt.

It is deeply regrettable that the Committee had to consider this case at all. I very much hope that the Charity Commission, and indeed other public bodies, learn the lessons so that we avoid a repeat of these unfortunate events.

I thank the other members of the Privileges Committee, the Clerks—especially the Clerk of the Journals, who is soon to be Clerk of the House—and Speaker's Counsel for helping us to navigate what was at times an incredibly difficult subject procedurally. I hope that my speech and that of the Leader of the House have demonstrated to all of us, however, that it was also one of great importance to the proper functioning of the House of Commons. I hope that Members will agree to the motion.

6.17 pm

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to speak to the motion on substituting Select Committee members if a Chair takes leave and the motion on virtual participation. I want to put on the record my thanks to the Modernisation Committee and the Procedure Committee, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Cat Smith), for their work. I also thank the Clerks who did amazing work to help us navigate these issues.

On virtual participation, there was a clear view among Chairs that there is real benefit to being in the room when Select Committees make decisions and carry out our work, because we need to have conversations both privately and in public. However, we are very aware that, in ordinary workplaces, reasonable adjustments should be made for serious health issues or disability, so we need to be in a more modern space. There was some serious discussion—although, there was no issue with what has been decided—that a person who is very unwell or on maternity leave should have the right to take that leave and not be present, and they should not be criticised for that. This change would allow people not to attend, even if they have a proxy vote, and no approbation should be laid upon them for that. We fought hard for sick leave and maternity leave, and Members should also enjoy those rights. There should be no pressure because people can participate virtually.

The other point about virtual participation is that, under the previous Standing Orders, if we were to experience an issue such as the ash cloud or covid again, there would be no activity in this place. I can tell those who were not here during covid that, in the four or five weeks after Easter, when we were locked down, the House rapidly ensured that virtual participation could

take place across the House and in Committees, but it required a change in the Standing Orders. This motion puts the matter on a proper footing. It is right to modernise, and that does not diminish the importance of sharing opinions in person.

There are also some important safeguards in the measures to ensure that anyone participating virtually is doing so in an appropriate place—for example, not from a car or a train, and not with someone else in the room. It is right that we explicitly say that, because the work of Select Committees is important and they are privileged proceedings of the House.

The motion allowing Chairs to be replaced more officially when they are on sick leave or on maternity or parental leave is really important. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton), who pioneered the approach. A few others have done so over the years, but she really stepped up and took on the role of acting Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee and did some amazing work in that job without all the normal, formal procedures that the motion will put in place.

The motion sets the tone by picking up some of the best practices of proxy voting, such as having a review period so that it cannot go on forever. Because Chairs are ultimately elected on a party political basis, there needs to be some thought about that, but it does allow flexibility. If, for example, a member of the Committee regularly steps into the Chair and the rest of the Committee decides that that person might be the more appropriate person to do that, it allows for wriggle room to allow that relevant and proper person to be the Chair even if they are a member of another party. That is important, and perhaps that has been thrown up more in this Parliament than in some others because of the large majority on the Government side, meaning that most Select Committees have only two Members from the other two main parties.

The Modernisation Committee has done a sterling job of navigating both these issues to ensure that we modernise to allow us all to participate as we properly should while retaining the integrity of the House and the integrity of Select Committees.

6.21 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Wyre) (Lab): On behalf of the Procedure Committee, I thank the Leader of the House for bringing forward these motions. I never had any doubt that he would be a radical and reforming Leader of the House, and the motions are evidence of that radical reforming nature that he has always had in him, which I am pleased to see.

The Procedure Committee has corresponded frequently with the Modernisation Committee. On 4 March my Committee expressed—the Leader of the House's Committee published this—its wholehearted support for the acting Select Committee Chair role, and on 25 March we supported the motions for virtual participation.

The motions reflect the nature of us being a modern and welcoming workplace where MPs' participation is supported, regardless of our health status—or, perhaps, parental leave—as such things, which can happen to any one of us, should not bar us from participating and representing our constituents' views in this place.

The measures come from a line of reforms, including proxy voting, which ensure that we are that radical and reforming Parliament that will be welcoming to anyone, regardless of their family set-up.

My view is that the priority will always be for members to attend Committees in person. As a Committee Chair, I can speak to how much easier it is to chair a meeting when members are in the room rather than all on screens. Does the Leader of the House foresee us having a thorough and timely review of these schemes in time to assess whether they could be made permanent and whether reforms may need to be made to them at that stage? I welcome the motions and hope that the House will choose to support them.

6.23 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Leader of the House for his speech. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Cat Smith) that he is radical, forward-thinking and progressive, and we thank him for that.

The Leader of the House will know that I served on the Modernisation Committee for a very short period of time. The strangest part of that experience was coming face to face with my predecessor as the Member for Harlow when he gave evidence to the Committee. His evidence to the Committee was really important, and that is one reason why I feel it is so important that I stand up and ensure that his voice is heard here.

I welcome the Leader of the House's words on the changes to be made to Select Committees. We all recognise the important role of Select Committees in the running of this place. I think of my short time on the Education Committee—my time on Select Committees always seems to be short—and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), who is in her place, for the work she did in securing a Government apology for the victims of the false adoption scandal. Select Committees can make a huge difference to what happens in this place and beyond.

However, I recognise the need for balance. It is important that we make Select Committees accessible—as the Member of Parliament for Harlow, I take accessibility seriously on behalf of my predecessor—but I also recognise the importance of in-person scrutiny. I have sat in a number of virtual meetings, including virtual council meetings during covid, and I do not think that they are necessarily as effective, particularly when huge numbers of people join them online. I echo the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) about the importance of having strict rules on virtual participation. We do not want to have our dog or cat appear on the screen during Select Committee meetings. It can happen to any of us, but it is not necessarily what we want when scrutinising somebody from an outside body who very much needs that scrutiny. I also echo my hon. Friend's comments about maternity rights and sick pay. It is really important that we support everybody in the House to have those.

Finally, I think that the Leader of the House has got the balance absolutely right in this case, and I very much support what he has said.

6.25 pm

Sir Alan Campbell: May I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to the debate? I will briefly respond to them. I am eternally grateful to the Chair of the Privileges Committee, the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), and very much agree with his remarks, including about the timeliness of any response from the Charity Commission and the significance of that issue. I will point out the importance—if I need to do so—of his Committee and its findings in that instance, because it had the desired effect, and I am grateful for that. I hope that lessons have been learned not just by the Charity Commission but by anyone who may feel tempted to go down that misguided route.

Let me turn to the comments of the Chair of the Liaison Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier). I am grateful to her Committee and to her for her work on that Committee as well as more widely. I absolutely agree with her about the importance of protecting Members' rights. The measures proposed today are about enhancing those rights. As she said, it is about modernising and maintaining integrity. I am pleased if the House thinks that we have got that balance right.

I thank the Chair of the Procedure Committee—my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Cat Smith)—and her Committee. Our Committees work closely together and she shares my radical instinct on these matters—I just point that out in case this goes horribly wrong, but I am sure that it will not.

My hon. Friend was right to emphasise that member participation should be in person and that the motions are time-limited. She asked whether there will be a review. I have a feeling, but it is no more than that. I obviously hope that these changes will be successful and that when the time comes the House will want to carry them forward. In that case, it would be right for us to review them before that.

Finally, I turn to the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince), who I thought was not going to mention Harlow, but he managed to get there in the end. He may have spent only a short time on Committees, and indeed only a relatively short time in the House compared to some of us, but he has been extraordinarily quick in picking up many of the best elements of working in this place. Central to that—he knows my view—is the importance of Select Committee work. I hope that hon. Members will support the motions. I commend them to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

SELECT COMMITTEES: VIRTUAL PARTICIPATION BY MEMBERS

Ordered,

That with effect from 30 November 2026:—

(1) Select committee members may in the circumstances set out in paragraph 2 below participate in any select committee proceedings through electronic means of communication in accordance with guidance to be determined and published by the Liaison Committee, which must take into account the need for cyber security.

(2) The circumstances in which this Standing Order applies are:

- (a) when access to the estate is significantly limited or prevented entirely, or

- (b) when reasonable adjustments need to be made for an individual committee member on the grounds of health and wellbeing, following the conclusion of an assessment process as set out in the Liaison Committee guidance.

(3) A Member participating through electronic means in accordance with this Standing Order shall count towards the quorum of the Committee.

(4) The provisions of this Standing Order apply to meetings held under the provisions of Standing Order No. 137A (Select committees: power to work with other committees).

(5) This Standing Order applies to all select committees appointed under Public Business Standing Orders, the Modernisation Committee, and such other select committees as the House directs.

(6) That this Order be a Standing Order of the House until the end of the present Parliament.—(*Sir Alan Campbell.*)

PRIVILEGES COMMITTEE REPORT: CHARITY COMMISSION ACTIONS

Ordered,

That this House agrees with the Committee of Privileges First Report of Session 2026-27, Matter referred on 4 September 2025: Actions of the Charity Commission (HC 315), and endorses its conclusions and recommendations.—(*Sir Alan Campbell.*)

SELECT COMMITTEES: MACHINERY OF GOVERNMENT CHANGES

Ordered,

That the following amendments and related provisions be made in respect of Standing Orders:

A: Select Committees Related to Government Departments

(1) That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended in the Table in paragraph (2) as follows—

- (i) leave out items 1, 3, 14 and 19;
- (ii) insert, in the appropriate place, the following items:

“Business, Innovation, Science and Trade”	“Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade”	11
“Digital, Culture, Media and Sport”	“Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport”	11
“Science and Technology”	“Government Office for Science”	11
“Women and Equalities”	“Office for Equality and Opportunity”	11

B: Related Provisions

(2) That all proceedings of the House and of its select committees in this Parliament, including for the purposes of calculating any period under Standing Order No. 122A (Term limits for chairs of select committees)—

- (i) relating to the Business and Trade Committee shall be read and have effect as if they had been done in relation to the Business, Innovation, Science and Trade Committee;
- (ii) relating to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee shall be read and have effect as if they had been done in relation to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee; and
- (iii) relating to the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee shall be read and have effect as if they had been done in relation to the Science and Technology Committee.

C: Liaison Committee

(3) That the Resolution of the House of 4 December 2024 (Liaison Committee: Membership), be amended, in paragraph (2)—

- (i) by leaving out “Business and Trade” and inserting “Business, Innovation, Science and Trade”;
- (ii) by leaving out “Culture, Media and Sport” and inserting “Digital, Culture, Media and Sport”;
- (iii) by leaving out “Science, Innovation and Technology” and inserting “Science and Technology”.

(4) That Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee) be amended, in paragraph (6), by leaving out “Business and Trade” and inserting “Business, Innovation, Science and Trade”.

D. European Committees

(5) That the Table in paragraph (7) of Standing Order No. 119 (European Committees) be amended in respect of European Committee C, by leaving out:

- (a) “Business and Trade” and inserting “Business, Innovation, Science and Trade”;
- (b) “Culture, Media and Sport” and inserting “Digital, Culture, Media and Sport”; and
- (c) “Science, Innovation and Technology”.

E. Scrutiny of orders and draft orders

(6) That Standing Order No. 18 (Consideration of draft legislative reform orders etc.) be amended in paragraph (1), by leaving out “Business and Trade” and inserting “Business, Innovation, Science and Trade”;

(7) That Standing Order No. 141 (Scrutiny of regulatory and legislative reform orders etc.) be amended in paragraph (1), by leaving out “Business and Trade” and inserting “Business, Innovation, Science and Trade”; and

(8) That Standing Order No. 142 (Localism Act 2011, etc.: scrutiny of certain orders and draft orders) be amended in paragraph (1), by leaving out “Business and Trade” and inserting “Business, Innovation, Science and Trade”.

F. Planning: national policy statements

(9) That Standing Order No. 152H (Planning: national policy statements) be amended in paragraph (2)(a) as follows—

- (a) by leaving out “Business and Trade” and inserting “Business, Innovation, Science and Trade”;
- (b) by leaving out “Science, Innovation and Technology” and inserting “Science and Technology”.—
(*Sir Alan Campbell.*)

Israel and Palestine

6.29 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Israel and Palestine.

As this is my first debate as Minister of State for the middle east, I want to begin by paying tribute to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), who spoke from the Dispatch Box on this important issue many times with great conviction and clarity. I also acknowledge the broad terms of the debate today. With your leave, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will focus on very specific issues, but I am sure that hon. and right hon. Members will want to cover a number of topics. I acknowledge the strong views of Members from across this House, and indeed various views on issues relating to Israel and Palestine are reflected in my constituency of Cardiff South and Penarth, where, I am proud to say, we have people from many different backgrounds and heritages. I am proud to represent constituents of Palestinian and Israeli backgrounds, and of a diversity of faiths and none. I draw attention to my past work on these issues in my time as an MP in this place and as a Minister, and to my declarations.

As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said in the House last week, we need to start from clear principles: this is a country that stands up for the rule of law, freedom, self-determination, and in this case, the cause of peace, and of a secure future for all Israelis and Palestinians. It is with those principles that we approach this important issue.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the Minister, who is much liked in this House. He always puts forward a balanced point of view. I have to say that at the weekend, after the decision taken by the Labour party last week, my Jewish friends and constituents, and other contacts from Israel, have been on to me in large numbers, expressing deep concern about what the Labour Government have put forward. Ever mindful that this is a time of unprecedented threats from Hamas and other terrorist entities, they say that the Government and Labour have introduced a “one-sided” trade ban. If that is the case, how can the Minister and the Government reassure my constituents about our deeply important security and intelligence sharing with Israel? There is a danger of a major diplomatic clash with Israel and the United States of America. These drastic steps will affect the lives of British people and, in particular, Jewish families.

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman raises significant points about the important security, intelligence and defence relationship that we have with Israel. I will be clear at the outset that the measures that we have taken very much relate to our dispute about the actions of this Israeli Government, not of Israel, and certainly not of the Israeli people. With regard to his Jewish constituents, I absolutely recognise the significant concerns and fears about the threats that Jewish communities in this country and across the world face, particularly from rising antisemitism and violence. Of course, we have marked some very sombre events in recent weeks—I have heard that reflected from my Jewish constituents—and I can absolutely assure him that the Government engage closely

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with representatives of the Jewish communities in this country. He will also recognise that a range of views have been expressed about the Government's announcements last week. I want to be clear that the British people, including those with ties to the region, want the suffering and violence in the region to end; a path to peace; and a two-state solution restored, in which a safe and secure Israel exists along a sovereign and viable Palestine. That is within the context of recognising the very real threats that Israel faces, including from Iran and its proxies.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Minister will have to be very careful about what we say and do because of the effect on Jews in this country. In that regard, what assessment has he made of the Campaign against Antisemitism's findings on Jew hate in our national health service? Does he agree that everybody needs to be assured that when they are at their most vulnerable, they will be dealt with equitably, without reference to their colour, creed, race or anything else? Yet we find that patients are being abused simply because they are Jewish, and that Jews working in the NHS are being disadvantaged.

Stephen Doughty: The concerns that the right hon. Gentleman raises are very serious, and he can be absolutely assured that the Government want to root out antisemitism in all its forms in this country, and indeed in every walk of life, whether in the health service or in education; I have heard very concerning examples of antisemitic incidents in schools and universities. That is why this Government are investing not only in the security of Jewish communities in this country, but in specific measures in public services. I take very seriously any concerns that he raises; of course, he has distinguished medical experience himself.

It is also important to recognise that next month will mark three years since the atrocity of 7 October, which was, as the Foreign Secretary said,

"a murderous act by a murderous terrorist organisation designed to massacre and instil fear across a whole population."—[*Official Report*, 8 September 2026; Vol. 790, c. 879.]

It was designed not only to cause death and destruction in Israel, but to instil fear across the world. This was the worst attack on Jewish people since the Holocaust, and I want to be clear again that there is no justification for the actions of Hamas, or their rejection of the peaceful co-existence of Israelis and Palestinians. They can play no part in that future, and they must disarm.

We avidly and continuously support the 20-point plan, and the efforts to bring about peace and a secure future for the people in Gaza and across the whole of Palestine. I also want to make it clear, as the Foreign Secretary did, that we reject those who make any attempt to de-legitimise Israel, or to support the so-called BDS—boycott, divestment and sanctions—movement. Our disagreements are with the Government of Israel and their actions, not with Israel, and certainly not with the Israeli people.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentions the commitment to peace long term, but unfortunately it has never seemed further away than it does today. Peace will involve building

bridges between communities in Palestine and Israel, and supporting civil society, which has been under attack, in Gaza and in Israel, unfortunately, by the Government. My hon. Friend's predecessor and the last Prime Minister committed to the international peace fund, which many of us were advocating for. Can my hon. Friend provide an update on the Government's position on the peace fund, and their support, I hope, for its continuation and growth? What role does he think it can play in building these bridges?

Stephen Doughty: I wholeheartedly support the type of work that my hon. Friend describes; indeed, he has been involved in various initiatives over the years, in a range of conflict contexts. He will be happy to know that I have just answered some parliamentary questions on the international peace fund; that will hopefully provide him with the reassurances that he seeks.

The appalling reality in Gaza and the west bank is placing the two-state solution that we all want to see under immense strain, as are the actions of this Israeli Government. As the Foreign Secretary has set out, Gazans have endured unimaginable trauma and suffering for three years. There is increasing evidence that war crimes appear to have been committed, and we support legal processes to determine whether that is so. At the same time, we are witnessing unprecedented violence on the west bank, including settler terrorism and ethnic cleansing perpetrated by settler terrorists. We condemn settler violence and settlement expansion, which are contrary to international law and a grave threat to the two-state solution.

The question has been asked: why now? Why was it necessary for the Government to act? I will set out clearly the reasons for doing so. We need to recognise that last year was a record year for new settlements. In August, we saw a long-standing red line crossed when the E1 tenders were issued for more than 1,200 homes. The Foreign Secretary pointed out that at the time of Oslo, around 270,000 settlers lived in Occupied Palestinian Territories. Today it is some 750,000, and more settlements have been approved in the four years of this Israeli Government than in the previous 20 years. We have seen 65 Palestinian communities completely expelled since October 2023 and a total of over 4,000 Palestinians evicted from their homes due to settler violence and state actions. This Government refuse to stand by and watch further suffering and the destruction of the two-state solution.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I commend my hon. Friend, and the Foreign Secretary last week, for the tone in which they have set out this recent decision on the settlements. I, too, have Jewish constituents who are very scared, but it is right, as the Minister said, to call a friend out when their behaviour goes too far. We know that there are big issues about the legal definition of genocide in Palestine. I wonder whether the Minister, or the Department, has had any conversations with the Israeli Government or the ambassador to the UK about the Foreign Secretary's statement last week, and whether the Minister could update the House.

Stephen Doughty: In advance of the statement, when the Foreign Secretary came into office and I took on this ministerial role, we were of course in contact with

the Israeli Government. The Foreign Secretary spoke to Foreign Minister Sa'ar, I spoke with the Israeli chargé here, and we have had continual contact with the Government of Israel about our concerns and what we believe needs to change. My hon. Friend will have seen the reaction and the commentary in recent days, which was deeply regrettable and deeply unfortunate, but of course we maintain close and important links with Israel on a range of other measures. This is very much focused on the actions that we see on the ground—the actions of, for example, settler terrorists and those who are backing them in expanding those settlements, and the withholding of aid to Gaza. This is not a quarrel with Israel, or the Israeli people.

We should always be proud that it was a Labour Government who took the historic decision to recognise the state of Palestine. It is also important to recognise our engagement on furthering the agenda of reform and inclusion in the state of Palestine; we work very closely with the Palestinian authorities, hampered as they are by the continued withholding of tax revenues and a range of other measures taken by the Israeli Government. As I said, we have been resolute that Hamas cannot be part of government going forward and must disarm. As many people have said, we have worked with the Palestinian authorities closely on the reform of prisoner payments, and welfare payments must be needs-based.

We are very clear that there needs to be reform and an inclusive process in Palestine. We want a viable, secure, prosperous and well governed Palestine going forward, and we have always been there as a partner to enable that. As for that state being threatened geographically, or in the functioning of its institutions, if we say that we believe in a two-state solution, we must believe in two states, geographically and in terms of ability to function. We have seen that goal come under even greater pressure in recent times.

We have been very clear in our engagement with both the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Government. I spoke to the Palestinian Foreign Minister recently, and have also engaged with those involved in the transitional processes that will hopefully lead to a settlement and a new Administration in Gaza. I met with the head of the National Committee for the Administration of Gaza when I was in Egypt recently, and have discussed, even in these difficult times, the ways we can look to a positive and productive future.

I must be clear, as the Foreign Secretary was, that the official view of this Government is now that Israel's continued occupation of Palestine is unlawful. That concurs with the central finding of the June 2024 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. We have come to that conclusion for a range of reasons. The Foreign Secretary and others have mentioned that Israel's entrenchment of its control, its intention to extend permanent sovereignty, and its expansionist agenda and support for and facilitation of illegal settlements are key in this. That is our clear position. It is very important that I set out our values, what we aim at and the legal position, and that leads us on to the actions that we must take.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I know of constituents who have moved from Israel to Leeds because of the actions of the Israeli Government,

and who applaud what we have done in banning Israeli settlement goods and services. Many of us stand squarely behind international law and human rights, and commend the Minister and the Foreign Secretary for their actions.

Stephen Doughty: I thank my hon. Friend for his support. I know that he has extensive experience on these issues, and he is right that many, diverse voices across this country have welcomed our actions.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Your Party): The Minister has been very generous in giving way. In his discussions with the Government of Israel, has he ever raised the issue of Israel never defining what its borders actually are? That seems to me to be a fundamental problem in any discussions on this issue going forward.

Stephen Doughty: Ultimately, we have always been very clear, as the right hon. Member will know, that these matters must be determined in future negotiations. Fundamentally, when we talk about the actions that we are taking, we are clear about 1967 and the green line. When it comes to the actions that I will talk about, we make very clear distinctions between illegal settlements and green-line Israel.

The Foreign Secretary announced new sanctions regimes, and powers through which we will ban trade in goods from illegal Israeli settlements. We will also take action on services; we will create new designation powers to go after individuals and companies that support, facilitate or profit from illegal settlement activity. We will ban advertising or the promotion of land and property in illegal settlements, and we will strengthen our existing global human rights sanctions regime to go after those who defy international humanitarian law, be it in Palestine or around the world. I can think of a range of other contexts for this, as sanctions Minister, and a range of other matters that Members raise in this House, including in relation to Sudan, Yemen and Myanmar. It is important that the Government have the power to act against those who defy international humanitarian law, deny access to humanitarian aid or frustrate the actions of humanitarian organisations. We are using our existing global human rights regime to sanction several extremist settlers who have supported or incited acts of violence against Palestinian communities.

Jim Shannon: The Minister is being incredibly generous. He has been very clear that Hamas cannot play a part in whatever future settlement there may be, and I welcome that, as I know my Jewish friends and my constituents would too, but can the Minister outline how he envisages that future, in which Hamas can play no part, to look? I would be very keen to hear his ideas.

Stephen Doughty: Key to that will be ensuring that Hamas put down their arms, and I think important lessons can be learned from the hon. Member's part of the world. Imperfect as many matters are there, we have important lessons that we can share, in relation to not just Gaza but other contexts too. I have been discussing that with a range of partners over recent times.

We have a process in place. We have the 20-point plan and the 15 points; it is deeply regrettable that we have not made further progress in recent weeks and months. We will work closely with the United States and other

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partners to further that agenda and find a way forward, but it is absolutely clear that we need to have unity, a functioning state between Gaza and the West Bank, and a state of Palestine that can function, and to ensure that all forms of violence and extremism are rooted out.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): On a functioning state, one of the issues raised with me by constituents who have come to my surgery—people from the synagogue and people who volunteer in Palestine—is that the Israeli Government have withheld \$5 billion in revenue from the Palestinian people. It was curtailed in 2019 but then stopped in 2023. That money should be going towards hospitals, schools and a functioning state, as the Minister says. Has he had meetings with the Israeli Government about the return of those revenues, maybe through a third party that they could trust, to make sure that the money goes to the right places?

Stephen Doughty: We have raised those issues on a regular basis, and I have discussed with Palestinian Ministers the impact that it is having on their ability to function. My hon. Friend raises a very important point.

I will make a little progress, because I know that a lot of Members want to speak. I know that a number of Members will want to raise the issue of arms sales and export licensing. I want to be clear to the House that we have already suspended or refused more than 80 export licences in relation to Gaza, and our suspension remains fully in place. I also remind hon. Members—there is a lot of misinformation about this issue—that not all export licences are for military purposes or indeed provided to the Israel Defence Forces; they include exports of crucial medicines, body armour, defensive capabilities and material that is not used in Israel but is used in important components for allies.

I want to emphasise very clearly, as the Foreign Secretary said, that because of our view that the occupation is itself unlawful we will also now refuse all licence applications for arms and other exports that materially contribute to the occupation. In effect, that provides a double lock against all relevant exports, on the basis of which we will determine our export licensing. That means that the ban on exports will remain for relevant items as long as the occupation persists—that is very clear.

I want to clarify, because it is important, what these measures will not do. Our sanctions regime will not target important and valued trade with green-line Israel. We oppose the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions campaign, including attempts to exclude Israel from, for example, sports or cultural activities. This is not a ban on travel or religious visits or, indeed, religious expression—that is very important. We will put in place the appropriate religious exemptions, and I thank all those who have raised important and sensitive matters with us on that. It is important that we listen to those communities and also that we do not share misinformation around what this regime does or does not do. We will work to ensure that the measures we set out do not have unintended consequences.

On the timing, the expanded global human rights regime will come within weeks. We expect the legislation for the wider new sanctions in relation to settlements to

take around six to nine months, but as the Foreign Secretary said, if we can do it sooner, we will. I want to explain to the House that because sanctions are impactful and powerful, but also technical, we have to take time to carefully design them to ensure that they have the impact we want, that they are lawful and proportionate, that they do not have unintended consequences and, crucially, that they are enforceable.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): Can I raise the “NAZA” film that was recently shown at the Venice film festival? It talks about the targeting systems that the IDF used in Gaza, and where it had specifically waited for Hamas fighters to return home so it could target them in a place they knew, but with huge civilian casualties. One whistleblower suggested that 500 civilians were killed in a strike on a single Hamas target. To give a UK example, something similar happened against three former British servicemen at the World Central Kitchen. Could the Minister reflect on that documentary and how we will get accountability for those former British servicemen who were killed with this awful targeting system?

Stephen Doughty: I have not seen the documentary that my hon. Friend mentions, but the fact is there have been horrendous humanitarian deaths, including the ones he mentioned and, of course, appalling numbers of civilian deaths in Gaza. The Foreign Secretary and I were clear that the decision about World Central Kitchen was shameful. We have been in contact with the families and have obviously urged the relevant authorities to reconsider that decision. In the end, all these matters will be reviewed and understood by courts and other competent authorities, but there is significant evidence of atrocities being committed, and I have been very clear on that specific case.

I am clear that we are already taking action on those involved in settler violence, using the powers we have. That includes the five extremist settlers that we sanctioned last Tuesday, and we have also, alongside partners including Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Norway, sanctioned extremist Israeli Ministers Smotrich and Ben-Gvir in their personal capacities in response to their repeated incitement of violence against Palestinian communities.

It is also important to say—this perhaps did not receive as much attention last week, but it is very important—that we absolutely recognise the threats that Israel faces, and not only Israel but other countries in the region, from Iran. That is why we imposed a number of sanctions on Iran last week, and we also sanctioned Lebanese Hezbollah. In the light of the actions we see in Yemen and around the Bab al-Mandab, we also absolutely condemn the actions of the Houthis—the atrocities they are responsible for—and we are working closely with partners, including the Government of Yemen and others. But it is absolutely crucial to recognise that the Houthis have previously struck against Israel.

I want to reiterate—I am conscious that we are in the high holy days—that no community must face discrimination, violence, hate or the threat of violence. Antisemitism disgusts me, as I am sure it does all of us in this House, and the Foreign Secretary is very clear that the actions we took are against the Israeli Government, not Israel, not its people. In any case, holding British Jews responsible for the actions ever of the Israeli Government

is antisemitism, plain and simple. I have heard directly from Jewish communities in my own constituency the threats and risks they face—I know we have all heard similar. We are living in a time when we have had the horrific attacks in Heaton Park and, indeed, what we saw in Golders Green. That is why we are investing £250 million for community security. We are taking action on antisemitism in schools and communities. In October, the Foreign Secretary will host representatives of the J7 to discuss how we can work across borders to tackle antisemitism. I praise the work of my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Jon Pearce) on post-Holocaust issues and, more broadly, the work of my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) on freedom of religion and belief.

I will conclude, because I know many Members want to speak, by saying that we know the actions we announced last week would prompt strong reactions, but that did not mean they were any less necessary. It is deeply regrettable that the Israeli Government have announced measures, such as wanting to close our consulate in Jerusalem, but we stand by our actions. If we are guided by values, by the law and by the facts on the ground, we need to see action and leadership. That is the right thing to do to defend the two-state solution, which is in the interests of Israelis and Palestinians, but also in our national interest, and we have been joined by others, including France and Canada.

Peace and security depend on our resolve to create the conditions in which Israelis and Palestinians can live side by side in their own states, confident in their futures. We might be far from that hope being realised at present, but it is one that we will work absolutely assiduously to deliver, and we have to speak and act with clarity to achieve that. I look forward to the contributions of Members across the House and am glad to have been able to open the debate.

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

6.55 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): I start by expressing our condolences following the death of a member of our armed forces in Ukraine on Saturday. I thank them for their service and say to their family that we hold them very much in our hearts.

As we approach the anniversary of Hamas's barbaric 7 October terrorist attacks next month, we also approach three years of war. Two hundred and fifty-one people were kidnapped that day, over 1,200 murdered and hundreds raped. It was not until this January that the remains of the final hostage were brought home—may their memory be a blessing.

After three years of immense suffering, recent months have, on paper, hinted at real progress towards peace: a UN Security Council resolution, a road map and transitional committee, and the first Palestinian legislative election since 2006 scheduled for November. Yet on the ground, neither the Israeli nor Palestinian people feel any safer. Hamas remains armed despite promises to the contrary, and Iran remains a destructive force, willing to sacrifice the futures of whole nations through its proxies in Palestine, Yemen, Lebanon and Iraq, creating instability to ensure the survival of its own despotic regime.

As the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat), set out last week, there is much we agree on across this House, and even where differences of approach exist, we share a deep concern that current events are taking Israelis and Palestinians towards a darker future. We are acutely aware of the immense suffering in Gaza and the fragility of attempts at peacebuilding. We agree that some Israeli Ministers have espoused unacceptable, dangerous and hateful rhetoric, even targeting our own country in recent weeks, and that groups of settlers in the west bank are engaging in illegal acts and violence, often encouraged by this same rhetoric. We also know that most in Israel reject this and seek a peaceful future, and we must keep them in our minds and not mistake the loudest voices as the most representative.

Before I turn to the Government's decisions, let me say something as a friend of Israel, as someone who has worked with Israel to defeat shared enemies such as Daesh. We have learned from failures in Iraq and Afghanistan that how you prosecute the operation to defeat terrorists determines whether you build and secure peace for your people in the long term. You do not defeat an insurgency by creating conditions in which the next generation is recruited. My fear is that three years on, Hamas is still armed, still governing and still recruiting. Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari, then spokesperson for the IDF, said, "Hamas is an idea," and that those who believe that it can be eliminated by force alone are mistaken, and he is right. You cannot bomb an ideology out of existence; you must allow an alternative and create the space for political transition. That is not a moral nicety; it is the operational lesson of every counter-insurgency campaign our country has ever fought, including those we have lost. The defeat of Hamas is important to our security here in the UK, and these lessons cannot be dismissed if we are to create a safer future for us and if the region is to find peace.

We all want a better future for the Israeli and Palestinian people, but to do so, we must have constructive channels of communication open with our partners in the region. As Foreign Secretary, Lord Cameron was able to secure additional aid to Gaza and to open new crossings by using our relationship to benefit those most in need. It is imperative that the Government maintain those relations to reflect the strategic importance of this relationship and to allow us to continue to influence events as friends. I believe the world is a better place when Britain is at the table, and more clarity is needed on the Government's position. The Board of Peace's efforts have largely been rejected, at least on sequencing. Hamas will not disarm first, Israel will not withdraw first, but the Government have said nothing about the British view of what the sequencing should be, and that silence benefits no one.

With Israeli elections next month and Palestinian elections in November, there is a small glimmer of hope that they will bring more moderate voices to the fore. That is why we remain concerned that the sanctions announced by the Government so close to the Israeli election may empower the very voices most opposed to peace. Before the Foreign Secretary's announcement, Israeli news was awash with headlines that Netanyahu allegedly failed to pass on a warning from the President of the United Arab Emirates to Israeli intelligence 10 days before the Hamas attack. Britain's sanctions wiped

[Alicia Kearns]

that off the news cycle; it is no longer being discussed. Given that Israel, a true democracy, is about to go to the polls, did the timing not warrant more reflection?

I have spent years arguing that this country imposes sanctions without plans ever to lift them in order to punish, rather than to deter or change behaviour. Let me ask Ministers what I would ask of any sanctions regime: what must change for these measures to be lifted, and will that be published and made clear so that they can achieve the effect they wish to see?

Turning to the Palestinian elections, there is a real possibility that Hamas could win a share of power. If Hamas win the Palestinian elections, will the Government give diplomatic accreditation to one of their representatives as ambassador? We must all speak honestly and accept that the odds are stacked against any Palestinian moderate while Tehran funds, arms and outbids all of them. A Hamas election victory could mark the first time the British Government accredit an ambassador appointed by a proscribed terrorist group. Will the Minister confirm in winding up that under no circumstances will the Government accept a Palestinian ambassador drawn from Hamas? I also ask for a written ministerial statement before 6 November setting out the accreditation criteria.

The Iranian state continues to support Hamas to use violence to advance its political aims. It is therefore vital that the Palestinian Authority security forces can maintain the peace needed for an election to take place, so it is deeply regrettable that, following the Foreign Secretary's statement last week, the UK training advisory mission to Palestinian security forces has been terminated when it is most needed. What efforts have the Government made to replace our contribution, be it with Jordanian or EU or other authorities and forces?

Likewise, the closure of our consulate in Jerusalem severs our main diplomatic channel to Palestinians in Jerusalem and the west bank when the situation is getting worse and the west bank should occupy more of our debate in this place. The Jordanians are doing an important job to protect the stability that there is, but Christian communities, among the oldest in the world, are being harassed, attacked and driven from their homes. How are the Government now going to assess the situation there and speak up for those being persecuted?

The Minister responded just now to a question from his Back Benches about the strike on the World Central Kitchen. James Henderson, John Chapman and James Kirby, three British veterans, were killed by Israeli fire while delivering food in Gaza. Their families are still waiting for the unedited drone footage to be handed to the coroner and for a resumption date for the inquest. Can the Minister give more clarity on what the Government are doing to secure that footage and that date, and on when we will get answers about how, in January 2024, an Israeli airstrike hit a residential compound in a designated safe zone in Gaza where British surgeons working for Medical Aid for Palestinians were living? Thankfully, none were harmed.

This conflict sits within a wider regional destabilisation that threatens us all. It is indisputable that the Iranian regime is by far the biggest sponsor of global terrorism, and Iran must never achieve its goal of nuclear armament, because a nuclear-armed ayatollah is concerning enough, but who among us can truly say that we trust that that

regime would not share such a weapon with the Houthis or with Hezbollah? We would be one step from nuclear-enabled terrorism.

Just last week, the Houthis briefly captured the pivotal Perim island in the Bab el-Mandeb strait. Although Yemeni Government forces repelled the attack, that must serve as a warning. Taken with the Houthi strike against the Saudi east-west oil pipeline, there is a real and escalating risk that Bab el-Mandeb will, like the strait of Hormuz, come to be closed. If the situation at both does not calm, the coming winter will be marked by rising inflation, economic hardship, medicine and food shortages, an energy crisis and worse. Given that, we must counter the Houthi threat and assist Saudi Arabia and other partners in maintaining maritime freedom.

The previous Prime Minister did at least work earnestly to establish an international coalition aimed at protecting the flow of trade. The Prime Minister now needs to convene this group, otherwise he will walk into a winter of discontent. The British people need him to take action. What contingency plans have been drawn up if the Houthi campaign continues and the Bab el-Mandeb strait and Saudi pipeline infrastructure are degraded? Given this context, the choice to delay the decision on the Jackdaw gas field in the North sea is mistaken.

We must not put our heads in the sand, because the reality is that next year we may find ourselves in a three-theatre conflict: Ukraine; the strait of Hormuz; and—which would be the greatest shock to the global economy and the cost of living in my lifetime—Taiwan. We must be prepared.

Britain did not choose this conflict, and we cannot choose to be unaffected by it, but Government action is needed to protect our economy, our supply chains and our people, because Iran and its proxies continue to target us directly, feeding and funding a national emergency of antisemitism in our country, and working to undermine our freedoms and security. Just last week, another two individuals were arrested on suspicion of assisting Iranian intelligence; that takes the total to 15 in the last two years.

The Government must also take action to shut down blatant propaganda operations on our streets: Al Masirah, the Houthis' main television station; LuaLua TV, which has an Ofcom broadcasting licence; and the Islamic Centre of England in Maida Vale, whose director has to be appointed by the ayatollah himself. There are various cut-outs across our country currently sponsoring visas and giving terrorists not a back door but a front door into our country, and we must end this game of whack-a-mole and unplug the machine. That means we must designate Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security.

It is in our interests to see a lasting peace in Israel and Palestine, and indeed across the whole region. We have an historical obligation not to look the other way, and the suffering of 7 October, Gaza and the west bank pain us all. The consequences of that day continue to reverberate and grow ever more pressing for us. We hope for the best and there are small glimmers of hope, but action is needed to protect us here in the UK by assuring and shoring up our interests in the region. So let us prepare for the worst and ensure that, if it comes, we have the means, the will and the vision to weather the storm.

7.7 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): I will confine my remarks to the subject of Israel and Palestine, and I declare my interest as co-chair of the all-party group on Britain-Palestine.

I very much welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement of 8 September, and particularly the Government having now made it clear that their official position is that Israel's occupation of Palestine is unlawful—it is illegal. That is an important change, and it at long last brings the United Kingdom into line with the International Court of Justice 2024 advisory opinion, but, as the Minister said, the court's conclusion was rooted in Israel's entrenchment of its control, its clear intention to extend permanent sovereignty, and its expansionist settlement agenda. It is also welcome that the Foreign Secretary acknowledged the increasing evidence identified by bodies, including the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry, that war crimes appear to have been committed in Gaza, and we support the appropriate legal processes to establish responsibility for those crimes.

On genocide, I welcome the Foreign Secretary's commitment to full, robust and fair judicial processes, with final determinations made by competent courts, but the UK does not need to wait for a final determination before acting. The UN commission of inquiry stated in September 2025 that Israel has committed genocide against Palestinians in Gaza and that state parties to the genocide convention had been on notice of a serious risk of genocide since at least January 2024. That serious risk itself triggers a duty to prevent genocide. The UK must therefore recognise that risk and act now: ending political, financial and military support that contributes to it; sanctioning those most implicated; committing to execute International Criminal Court arrest warrants; and supporting South Africa's case at the ICJ.

I welcome the Government's commitment to refuse arms licences where exports materially contribute to the unlawful occupation, but the Foreign Secretary did not clearly confirm when I asked during last week's statement whether existing licences will be cancelled where they meet that test. Will the Minister confirm that the new double lock will apply to existing licences, and set out the criteria by which the Government will determine whether an export contributes to the occupation? Colleagues will wish to know whether British arms exports currently available for the IDF in the west bank will no longer be licensed.

I welcome the proposed sanctions on goods and services linked to illegal settlements I very much welcome that in the context of the previous ridiculous position of properties being marketed in this city for sale in the west bank. When that was raised, the wholly inappropriate response was to send in the Advertising Standards Authority, so I welcome the movement on that by Front Benchers. Will the Government confirm that these measures will cover all settlements, including existing settlements, that the ban on goods will apply to exports as well as imports, and that there will be no "re-export to settlements" clauses in contracts, as modelled on the guidance issued in respect of Russia?

Finally, I sincerely hope that this reset will be furthered and sustained, as only by doing so can the commitment to a two-state solution be truly achieved.

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

7.12 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I welcome the Minister to his place. I look forward to working with him and I pay tribute to the work of his predecessor, who was called to the Chamber to discuss this issue many times. I also pay tribute to the consulate general in East Jerusalem, which I visited with a Select Committee, that did some truly fantastic work. I regret that it has been closed and I hope that it will be reopened swiftly.

The Liberal Democrats welcomed the Foreign Secretary's statement last week designed to protect the two-state solution and the territorial integrity of the Palestinian state, that finally brought forward a ban on trade in goods and services with the illegal Israeli settlements. This was long overdue and the Liberal Democrats have called for it for years. Many of my constituents in Esher and Walton have also called for it, as did members of my Jewish community, some of whom have been campaigning for it. The Government must now ensure this ban is comprehensive and rigorously enforced, leaving no room for doubt as to the legal consequences for businesses involved in supporting or sustaining illegal settlements, and it must be enforced urgently.

The Government must outline how they will monitor and implement this ban, and commit to ensuring that the burden of proof is placed on Israeli authorities to provide verifiable certification that imported goods originated within the internationally recognised pre-1967 "green-line" borders, denying UK entry to any uncertified items originating from those illegal settlements. The Government should draw on the legal provisions set out in schedule 1 to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 to ensure that the ban on services is comprehensive, and they should introduce secondary legislation to amend SAMLA, placing a legal duty of due diligence on UK banks and financial institutions to verify that none of their direct operations, supply chains or customers is financing the purchase, construction or other service provision for illegal settlements.

We would like the Government to outline that any violation of these bans would result in enforcement measures under the UK-Israel trade and partnership agreement. We call on the Government to impose a comprehensive ban on all arms exports to Israel, including the sale of F-35 components, and to expand sanctions on Ministers in the Israeli Government's security cabinet who are encouraging settlement expansion, including Prime Minister Netanyahu himself.

A two-state solution represents the only political settlement that can deliver peace, dignity and security for Israelis and Palestinians alike. But Hamas, as a brutal terror organisation that threatens the survival of the state of Israel, can have no role in the future of Palestine. The UK, together with international partners, must develop a plan to progress urgently the disarming and disbanding of this terror group.

Preserving the territory of Palestine must be a foundation stone for the building of the Palestinian state, but another must be the strengthening of the governance capabilities of the Palestinian Authority. There are vital reforms that must take place within the Palestinian Authority to ensure that they can act as an effective

[*Monica Harding*]

state-building force. These must include strengthening the rule of law and protections for freedom of expression, cracking down on corruption and following through on ending the operation of the martyrs fund. The Government must support and hold the PA to account for the implementation of these reforms.

It is critical that the upcoming Palestinian elections are free, fair and open to advance further democratic reform across Palestine, so will Ministers work with President Abbas and the Palestinian Authority to help deliver these, including ensuring access for international election monitors. We must also recognise that current Israeli restrictions are contributing to severe economic insecurity in the west bank. The Government must put pressure on the Israeli Cabinet to ensure that the Palestinian Authority have the revenues to which they are entitled and access to banking systems to support the economy.

The Israeli legislative elections in October are an opportunity to deliver a new vision for the country that reverses illegal settlement growth, prioritises diplomacy over territorial expansion and champions engagement with moderate partners in Palestine to deliver a better future for both communities. If the cycle of violence continues, it will only strengthen the voices of extremists on both sides who reject co-existence between Israelis and Palestinians. Meanwhile, the UK Government must use all the leverage they can, working with international partners and with the Israeli Government to stop the loss of civilian life in Gaza even after the ceasefire.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley) (Lab): The UK Government need to work with all their partners, but the reality is that unless America takes action, Israel is not going to back off from the atrocities it is carrying out. We need to push all the levers available to us to make sure that America is on side. The United Nations Security Council resolutions were almost all vetoed by America on its own. Unless America gets behind this peace plan, there will be no peace in Palestine or Israel.

Monica Harding: The hon. Member is absolutely right that America has a critical role to play in this conflict.

To give some numbers, as of 6 August, at least 300 children have reportedly been killed in Gaza in the 300 days since the ceasefire was announced—an average of one child a day. Gazans continue to remain in the grip of a man-made humanitarian catastrophe in the strip. The UK Government must do more to alleviate the humanitarian crises there and the one growing in the west bank. Over 2 million people in Gaza are living on around 30% of the territory, sheltering in unsafe conditions among destroyed buildings, rubble and waste. Some 70% of Gaza remains under IDF control. The UK must now apply genuine pressure to Netanyahu's Government to ensure that food, aid, medical supplies and other essentials can reach Gazans now, without impediment and under the auspices of the UN, and that children and all civilians are protected.

I have called on UK Ministers to pressure Netanyahu's Government to lift their arbitrary restrictions on non-governmental organisations supplying humanitarian aid to the strip. Last week, I noted in this Chamber that more than 1.4 million people in Gaza are acutely food

insecure, yet Israel's current interpretation of dual-use restrictions means that Palestinians are routinely and systematically denied essential items, including those needed for rehabilitation by the tens of thousands of people who have suffered life-changing injuries during this conflict.

The Foreign Secretary agreed that blocking those goods was appalling and seemed to suggest that it was a strategy. What does the Minister think is the strategy of the Israeli Government? Will he put pressure on them to undo those dual-good restrictions to allow the Palestinians to be self-sufficient, and to ensure that aid is sustainable and that they are no longer expected to live hand to mouth?

From October, the World Food Programme will cut the number of people it can feed in Gaza from 1.1 million to 600,000—not because the need has reduced, but because the money has run out. Those are people who will go without food, in a territory where 100,000 women and children are already expected to need treatment for malnutrition in the coming year. The UK is the ninth-largest donor to World Food Programme operations in Palestine, behind the USA, Germany and France. Our annual contribution fell from \$18 million in 2024 to \$9.3 million last year, and to just \$4 million this year. That is a reduction of 78%. The Government cannot truly speak of their commitment to the Palestinian people while presiding over cuts like those. Will the Minister explain how those two things are reconcilable?

The brutal cuts to our aid budget have meant that our response to all humanitarian crises is limited. I have asked many Ministers in this House when we should expect at the very least a road map for restoring the 0.7% aid budget—a commitment that we in this House have enshrined in law. Again, can the Minister set out that timeline? Can he confirm that his party—the party of the Department for International Development and making poverty history—is committed to seeing our aid budget returned in full?

Jeremy Corbyn: The hon. Member is making a very strong point about the lack of food security for the Palestinian people in Gaza. Does she recognise that Israel now occupies around 70% of Gaza, so the population is restricted to 30% of the area? Some years ago, there was a huge move to make Gaza once again a major food-growing area, which traditionally it always had been. Does she think that should be part of the development process again?

Monica Harding: I 100% agree. I made the point last week that the dual-use restrictions mean that people can bring an egg into Gaza, but not a chicken; and a potato, but not a potato tuber. That means Gazans are living hand to mouth and are absolutely reliant on the Israeli state for their wellbeing and health.

The Government must engage with international partners and the Israeli authorities to ensure that journalists and human rights investigators are allowed into the strip. That is essential for accountability for war crimes on both sides of the conflict. We believe that robustly challenging the illegal actions of this extremist Israeli Government is compatible both with staunch support for the rights of the states of Israel and Palestine to exist and with resolute support for the rights of British Jews to live free from the scourge of anti-Jewish hatred.

Antisemitism has no place in our society. We stand in solidarity with the Jewish community and all those affected, and we reaffirm our commitment to tackling hatred in all its forms. Those who spread antisemitic hatred or incite violence against Jews—whether online, at marches or elsewhere—must be stopped. It is never acceptable.

Lastly, this is a debate on Israel and Palestine, but any serious discussion of the situation must also consider the situation in Lebanon. In Lebanon, more than 350,000 people remain displaced, and more than 1,200 civilians have been killed in the latest phase of fighting, including children and health workers. Israel has reportedly seized and occupied 230 square miles of Lebanese territory, creating a yellow line restricted zone similar to that in Gaza. The Israeli Government must cease their military operations in southern Lebanon and withdraw from the country.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): On the point about the people displaced in Lebanon, does the hon. Member agree that if there is to be a comprehensive peace settlement between Israel and Palestine, all 700,000-odd people who were forcibly expelled from the west bank, from Gaza and from elsewhere during the Nakba must be allowed to return? At the moment they are all in refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt.

Monica Harding: I agree. We must stand with the refugees emanating from this crisis in their plight, including with the countries that are supporting them, such as Jordan. We must ensure that our commitment to those countries is secure, including our financial commitment.

Israel's continuing occupation violates Lebanon's sovereignty and is exacerbating the humanitarian crisis, which we have just spoken of. This House must recognise and reaffirm that Hezbollah is a brutal terror organisation from which the Israeli Government have the right to defend themselves and their people. It must be disarmed, but that must be achieved by working with leaders in Beirut and through international organisations. Will the Minister set out what role the UK is playing in pushing for a proper ceasefire in Lebanon and for the disarmament of Hezbollah? Will he confirm that Israel must withdraw from all sovereign Lebanese territory?

Progress has been made in this last week that we on the Liberal Democrat Benches have long called for, but we must be certain that statements are followed up with robust action and that we stand up as the UK, as we always must, for international law, for international humanitarian law and for peace.

7.25 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I begin by acknowledging and welcoming the hugely important step announced by the Foreign Secretary and reaffirmed by the Minister today. The ban on imports of settlement goods and the powers to target those who support, facilitate or profit from settlement activity, and the conclusion in line with the ICJ's substantial ruling that Israel's continued occupation of Palestine is unlawful, is a hugely welcome step taken by this Government. Equally important is the fact that the Government have made clear the complete reset in our relationship. That is very important, but we must be clear that any reset must

mean more than just a change in language; it must mean serious consequences for those who flagrantly breach international law.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I agree with my hon. Friend that it is very good that we heard from the Government last week that they recognise that Israel's occupation is unlawful. Does he agree that, given that it is unlawful, it is absolutely vital that it is the Palestinian people, but also the international community in the widest sense, who get to set what happens in the future in the territories of Palestine, rather than it being solely Israel's responsibility, which is the view of Israel?

Imran Hussain: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and it is the point that I am making. I will come on to the international rules-based order shortly, and that will perhaps answer his very important question.

Many of us in this House have been calling for these measures for years. Let us be honest: many of us have stood here in debate after debate, speaking about these very issues, only to be told by Ministers time and again that they are reviewing what action to take or looking at the ICJ advisory opinion. While we were having those debates in this House and deliberating, the Palestinians did not have the luxury of waiting. Frankly, it has taken a change of Government to get us to this place. Let us be clear: on genocide in Gaza, war crimes across Palestine and the ethnic cleansing of whole Palestinian communities, the previous Government should have acted. They failed to stand against injustice, failed to stand for human rights, and failed to stand for the international rules-based order.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a passionate speech. I am sure that like me, he will have had many constituents lobbying him on this issue over the past few years; in my constituency, the Hanwell Friends of Sabastiya, which is a village on the west bank, have often come up to speak to me. Does he agree that community organisations and friendship groups like that have had an important role to play in influencing this Government to take the robust steps that they have now taken?

Imran Hussain: My hon. Friend raises a much broader point. Let us pay tribute to not just the fantastic community groups in all our constituencies, but the millions of people who rightly marched on our streets when our Government got it so wrong. I pay tribute to each and every one of them for their peaceful protest. They were right, and those making the decisions in this place were wrong.

I will concentrate my remarks not on the direction of the recent announcements, but on the pace at which this Government should now travel. As always, my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald) made a powerful contribution. He is absolutely right; while I, like him, welcome the Government's announcement of a double lock on arms licences, this House still needs clarity today. I very much hope that the Minister will clarify whether that double lock applies to existing licences.

My sincere request of this Government is that we must go further. We must now end all remaining arms sales to Israel and, in particular, close the F-35 loophole. We must ensure that no equipment of UK origin directly

[Imran Hussain]

or indirectly supports genocide in Gaza, or war crimes anywhere in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The scale of death and suffering caused by the right-wing Netanyahu Government's genocide in Gaza demands urgent and further immediate action. With more than 70,000 Palestinians killed in recent years, including over 21,000 children, the scale of this horror should shame the entire international community. The blockade, the denial of aid, the destruction of civilian infrastructure, and the forced confinement of Palestinians while Israel illegally occupies most of their land have created the most serious humanitarian crisis. This is a product of the machinery of genocide and war crimes that Israel continues to operate. Children continue to be denied food, water and medicines, and families continue to be pushed into impossible conditions.

If we are serious about international law, we must go further. We must press for the full and immediate lifting of the blockade, unimpeded humanitarian access and the protection of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency's mandate, staff, premises and operations. We should also be clear that although aid funding is, of course, welcome—the spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats, the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding), was right that there is a different debate to be had about our contribution to international aid and how, disappointingly, it has dropped down the agenda—it cannot be a substitute for the political action needed to stop the war crimes and the conditions of genocide that make that aid necessary in the first place.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): The hon. Member has repeatedly mentioned the word “genocide”, yet the Government repeatedly say that only a competent court can formally determine whether genocide has occurred in Gaza. Does he agree that that is not the issue, and that genocide prevention law exists precisely because waiting for a final judgment may mean that it comes too late? Does the hon. Member also agree that we have an obligation to act, not once a court has found that genocide has taken place, but as soon as there is a serious risk that genocide may be occurring?

Imran Hussain: Of course I agree with the hon. Member. The genocide is unfolding right before our eyes. I would gently say to him that the Foreign Secretary's language in this House has to be within certain scope. However, he did list off genocides, which to me suggested that he accepts that there is a genocide. Enough scholars, legal minds and other people across the globe have confirmed that this is a genocide unfolding right before our eyes.

I will be very brief, Madam Deputy Speaker. I welcome the announcement regarding the west bank; the Foreign Secretary was right to call out the settler terrorists in the west bank. That matters, because Palestinian communities know exactly what that violence is designed to do: frighten them, isolate them and drive them from their home. The powers announced recently are the right powers; now, they must be used. Sanctions on all settler terrorists, as well as the whole settlement enterprise—those who finance it, profit from it, build it, advertise it and politically sustain it—must come as soon as possible.

I will make some final submissions regarding the ICJ and ICC. I welcome the Foreign Secretary's comment that we will stand with the ICC and ICJ. Frankly, it is

disgraceful that judges in those courts have come under pressure and faced sanctions. An international rules-based order counts for nothing if we abandon the institutions that uphold it the moment their rulings become inconvenient. We cannot cite the ICJ's advisory opinion one week and say nothing when its judges are threatened the next week. We must continue to stand with the international rules-based order.

In closing, the recent announcements are an important first step, but they are only the start. The war crimes, genocide and ethnic cleansing must end, and the international community must commit to ending them. Those responsible for genocide, war crimes and ethnic cleansing must be held to account, and we in this House have a moral, ethical and legal duty not to stop until that happens.

7.38 pm

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): Many across the House, like me, welcome the Foreign Secretary's announcement of a ban on products from illegal settlements in the occupied territories. Back in the early '80s, I was a kibbutznik based at Kibbutz Re'im in the Negev, where I was conducting agricultural research. In those now far-off days, I would go with my Israeli friends to meet their Palestinian friends in Gaza—to meet, to trade, and to drink strong black Arabic coffee. Re'im was one of the kibbutzim attacked on 7 October 2023, so I can say that I understand something of the area and the tensions, and I can also say that peace is possible.

I would like to talk about a topic raised by one of my constituents at a constituency surgery in Melksham and Devizes last Saturday: the closure of the unit tracking potential law breaches, as announced in *The Guardian* on 24 April. The closure of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's international humanitarian law cell is doubly worrying at this time, especially when it means that funding for the conflict and security monitoring project run by the Centre for Information Resilience will come to an end.

Alicia Kearns: To add to the hon. Gentleman's point, he may not be aware that the Government have also closed the atrocity prevention centre that was set up in the Cabinet Office. I spent two years fighting for its introduction. Its whole point was to identify the signs of ethnic cleansing very early on, so that the Government could send experts in to improve the Foreign Office's response. Does he not agree that that closure is concerning, given that we see more conflict around the world, not less?

Brian Mathew: I heartily agree with the hon. Lady. The centre's work for the FCDO included the world's largest open-source monitoring of incidents across Israel, Palestine and Lebanon. It is the only programme in the UK that collects, verifies and analyses human rights and conflict incidents in Israel and the occupied territories. The closure of the monitoring programme will mean that the Foreign Office will lose access to a database of 26,000 and counting incidents in the middle east, stretching back to 7 October 2023. The database also helps FCDO teams decide whether arms export control licences to Israel should remain suspended, and it is used by officials discussing whether international humanitarian law—for example, rules on proportionality—is being breached. The head of the Metropolitan police's war crimes team in the counter-terrorism unit underlined the importance

of CIR's work in helping the Metropolitan police to consider war crimes allegations, including the unlawful shooting of minors in Gaza.

I hope the Minister can clarify whether these cuts have been reversed. For the Government to be operating blind at this time would be extremely concerning. Furthermore, this issue casts light on the importance of the FCDO's work and the self-defeating nature of the Government's cuts to our aid programme, which those in my party, and I suspect many Members across the Chamber, condemn.

7.43 pm

Matthew Patrick (Wirral West) (Lab): This weekend was Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year. Jewish families wished one another "Shana Tova". They dipped apples in honey, in the hope that the new year ahead will be sweet. As Rosh Hashanah closed, families started a 10-day journey through to Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of atonement. It is a day when we seek forgiveness for our failings and vow to do better. Today is the first of those 10 days. It is a period of profound seriousness, and a chance to reflect on the past and to ensure that the future is brighter.

Last year, on the high holy day of Yom Kippur, Jihad al-Shamie went to Heaton Park synagogue armed with a knife to murder Jews. As he stabbed one worshipper, he shouted, "This is what they get for killing our children." It is no wonder that this is a sensitive time and a sensitive debate for the Jewish community, because as Mr al-Shamie's actions show, there are those who would cloak their antisemitism in concerns about the actions of Israel—those whose murderous intent and racist ignorance is dressed up as a moral crusade. I choose to reflect on the past year, and I hope to use that to help build towards a brighter year ahead, because surely that is what each and every one of us in this House is here to do—to chart a way forward. Our job is not to amplify grievance, or to give in to hopelessness, but to do the hard yards of understanding, and the perhaps even harder yards of playing our role in getting us to a better place.

Dame Meg Hillier: I thank my hon. Friend for the tone of his comments, and for reminding us of the seriousness of this, and of what took place in Manchester last year. He seems to be suggesting that dialogue between the peoples of our countries is important. Does he not think that twinning with Israeli cities is an important thing to do? It means that the people of Israel, the people of London and the people of Palestine can talk to each other. We should not just be led by what Governments do.

Matthew Patrick: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. Twinning offers an important opportunity to hear that dialogue and to make sure that we are not shutting out the people who are directly impacted. I certainly support that. At next year's Yom Kippur, I dearly hope that we have an opportunity to look back on a year of progress. I hope that the threat of EI settlements has ended, and with it, the violent expansion of settlements across the west bank that terrorise Palestinians. I hope that extremism no longer has any influence on the Government of Israel. I hope that the everyday leadership of Israelis and Palestinians, and of Jewish and Muslim communities, inspires people towards peace and towards love.

I hope that the Palestinian Authority, often considered the best hope of leading the Palestinian people, end once and for all the abhorrent practice of paying terrorists each and every month based on the level of destruction and death they wreak upon the Jewish people. I hope that the Palestinian people and Palestinian children are not taught using textbooks that say I am to be hated because I am Jewish. I hope that those children are not brought up to believe that hating Jews is as necessary a life skill as learning maths or science. I hope that Hamas, an evil who have inflicted untold damage on the people of Israel and the people of Gaza, are no more. I hope that in their place is a leadership who see aid as an opportunity to feed their people and to build out infrastructure that might make the everyday life of Gazans better.

I hope, as I have called for in this Chamber many times in the past, that Israel has increased the flow of aid into Gaza so that people have no worry about from where they might find their next meal or dose of medicine. I hope that those in Gaza who have stolen more than £1 billion of public money to build an underground terrorist tunnel network and ply it with weapons become marginalised voices, recognised for the malign influence that they are. I hope that the current Iranian regime, which exports terrorism right across the globe, including here in Britain, and without whom this conflict could never be sustained, is over. I hope that in its place are a Government who treat all the people of Iran—man or woman, gay or straight, Jew or Muslim—as equal people deserving of love and respect.

I am an optimist. I cannot give up on the idea of a two-state solution, but—it is difficult to say this—I understand why some people have. I have spoken to lifelong peace activists in Israel who decided that the depravity of 7 October, and the celebrations that followed it, showed them that they would be fools to believe they could share peace with people who want them dead. I also understand that someone growing up in Gaza knowing war, hunger, destruction and death similarly might not see an alternative path. They may not see their neighbours as partners towards peace. However, my optimism does not dismiss these views, or simply wish that they would go away; my optimism is a belief that we can change course. It has been done before.

In this House, we are rightly proud of what we achieved in Northern Ireland through the Good Friday agreement. That was anything but easy. Prejudices ran deep. Terrible injustices were inflicted upon people, and hurt reached into every corner and every community of Northern Ireland. More of the same was not an option, but that required change and courage. It placed a demand on those who wanted peace—an uncomfortable demand to see and pursue an alternative that hardly seemed possible. We can learn from them.

It starts with us here, with understanding, with compassion, with humanity and dignity in everything we do. It requires us to listen, sometimes to views that we do not always like, and sometimes to people who are not "on our side". It starts with ending a culture, here in the UK and around the world, in which we take sides on this issue as if it were a football match. That is not a path to peace. If we fail to start from the idea that even in the most intractable and bloody conflicts, children and non-combatants should be kept safe, we will never find that path. If we want to play our role, in this place,

[Matthew Patrick]

in building a two-state solution, we must not see this as a debate needing more heat, but as one needing more light. Where there is anger—understandable, justifiable anger—we must work to ensure that the words we speak do not entrench that anger and, in so doing, block any future chance of progress. The UK and our allies owe that to the people of Israel and Palestine, those who are doing the hard work of trying to find peace in the most difficult of circumstances. We owe them our solidarity. The alternative is that we risk looking back, in a year, at another missed opportunity.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a hugely powerful and, I think, intelligent speech. He may well come on to this, but will he join me in asking the Government to redouble their efforts to secure the international fund for Israeli-Palestinian peace, which would give those communities a chance to build peace up from the bottom when the political leadership is failing from the top?

Matthew Patrick: I know that my hon. Friend speaks with great experience, and I am sure that those on the Front Bench have heard what he has said. Any opportunity to fund the people who, day in day out, are making the future of peace still possible is one that we must take. As I was saying, we owe them our solidarity, because the alternative is to look back, in a year, at more missed opportunities with more anger and more hate, and with peace ever further away. I do not want that on my conscience, so I commit myself to learning those lessons.

7.52 pm

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): Last week represented an important change in Britain's approach to Israel and Palestine, and I welcome it. For the first time, this Government acknowledged the reality staring us in the face: that the occupation is unlawful, that illegal settlements are destroying any prospect of Palestinian statehood, and that in parts of the west bank Palestinians are being ethnically cleansed by what the Foreign Secretary himself called settler terrorists. Those are not my words; they are now the words of His Majesty's Government. That makes the question before us today all the more urgent. If we finally recognise what is happening, why are we still refusing to confront those who are responsible for making it happen?

This is not simply the work of a few rogue extremists. Under this Israeli Government, more settlements have been approved in four years than in the previous 20. Some 800,000 settlers now live across the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The Foreign Secretary himself told the House that settlers had attacked Palestinian communities under Israeli military protection, and that Israeli Government Ministers had supported ethnic cleansing. We need to stop pretending that the settlements are somehow separate from the Israeli state, because the settlements are a monster of its own making. By tinkering around the edges with sanctions on settlers and leaving the Government at the heart of their enterprise untouched, this Labour Government are trying to tiptoe around the raindrops and not get wet; but, like the last Government, they will be soaked in complicity, and the sanctions do nothing to punish the real architects of this apartheid.

Settlers are murdering Palestinians with IDF protection. The Israeli Government are giving them the land to invade in the first place. If we are serious about ending illegal settlements, where is the ban on trade with the nation of Israel itself? Government policy now contains an extraordinary contradiction. We will sanction the people who finance settlement construction; we will penalise companies that build settlements, and ban the products coming from within them; yet when the Israeli state allocates the land, approves the plans and sends armed forces to protect settler terrorists, the consequences suddenly stop.

As I said only last week in a question to the Foreign Secretary, this is a litmus test of our most basic principles. If those who help to establish illegal settlements should be sanctioned, why not the officials who authorise them? Why not the institutions that finance them, and the state contractors that build them? Why should our wider trading relationship remain untouched when settlement expansion is official Israeli Government policy?

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): The July 2024 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice declared that Israel's continued presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories was unlawful under international law and that Israel must end the occupation as quickly as possible, stop all settlement activity, and evacuate all settlers. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is time to honour that advisory opinion, and does he also agree that we should make a distinction between the actions of the Israeli Government and the state of Israel itself?

Ayoub Khan: I agree wholeheartedly with the first part of the hon. Member's intervention—of course we should uphold international law—but I am a little confused by the latter part. It is the Israeli state that drives policy, and one cannot distinguish between the Israeli state and the Israeli Government. I entirely agree that we must not conflate them with the Israeli people, because that would be wrong. I suspect that all Members in this House want to see the scourge of antisemitism tackled, as well as anti-Muslim hate. There was a massive increase in anti-Muslim hate following 7 October, across the city of Birmingham and across the country, and we must do whatever we can in this House—unified by one principle, the principle of humanity—to ensure that where we see wrong we address it, and do so without fear or favour.

As I have said before, one of the prime reasons why we have independent Members of Parliament, why protesters came on to the streets, and why students at universities are protesting is the fact that they are not antisemitic. Of course, I accept that there have been occasions when there has been antisemitism, and we must all condemn it, but in the main, all those people were championing one aspect: the freedom of the Palestinians, who have been under oppression for so many decades.

I return to my original point. We must all work together to prevent the rise of antisemitism in this country, as well as anti-Muslim hate, and we must all try to address that conflation. We have witnessed, for example, the suppression of doctors' freedom of speech by their regulators when all they have done is question some of the actions that have been taken. Israel cannot claim to be a victim—not the people of Israel, but the

state—when it prevents journalists from entering. We should say, “If you are open and transparent, allow journalists to come in, and allow them to document what is taking place.” However, I suspect that Israel will be unwilling to do that, precisely because of the genocide that we are witnessing.

In Gaza, more than 73,000 Palestinians are officially recorded as dead—murdered. Homes have been reduced to rubble, aid has been obstructed, and entire bloodlines have been wiped out. I have no hesitation in calling out what everyone is seeing with their own eyes: a genocide, livestreamed for the world to see. Netanyahu’s Government have demonstrated an extraordinary contempt, time and again. Extraordinary reporting raises profoundly disturbing questions about what Netanyahu knew before that attack. According to *Haaretz*, the President of the United Arab Emirates warned him a week and a half earlier that Hamas were planning a major operation, and he did not pass that warning to his security chiefs. How absurd is the proposition that a Prime Minister informed of an imminent threat would not advise his chief security officer? Either he did not believe the information or

“he wanted to see what they could plan so that then he could come down hard”.

Those are not my words; they are the words of none other than Hillary Clinton.

We were told for years that the destruction would stop when hostages were released—Netanyahu said the war could end if Hamas surrendered and returned them—yet Haim Rubinstein, a spokesperson for the Israeli Hostages and Missing Families Forum, said as far back as 2025 that Israel rejected an early proposal to release civilian hostages if the IDF did not enter Gaza. This is the regime that we continue to do business with and are choosing to stand by—a far-right Government who have refused peace at every turn and in its place opt for bloodshed and gaslighting. Yet for far too long, western Governments have taught Netanyahu one lesson and one lesson only: condemnations will come, statements will be issued and red lines will be crossed, but meaningful consequences will not follow.

Last week’s announcement can be remembered in one of two ways: it can be the moment Britain finally changed course, or it can become another intolerable status quo, with tougher words, narrowly drawn sanctions, business as usual elsewhere and yet another year in which the prospect of Palestinian statehood crumbles under the weight of Israel’s never-ending bloodshed. Acknowledging the problem cannot be the end of British policy. If we truly believe Palestinians have the right to self-determination, this must be only the start, because as the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) said, time is not on our side, and we cannot and must not wait until there is no Palestine left to recognise.

8.2 pm

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I welcome the contribution by the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) this evening and that of the Foreign Secretary last week.

Having supported the cause of the Palestinian people since the early 1990s and having a keen interest in Jewish culture and religion, I was particularly eager to visit the

countries for myself to better understand the situation. I did so in May this year with Members from across the Chamber, and I am very grateful to Yachad for organising the visit. I declare an interest in that regard.

Like most Members, I have read and thought a lot about the events of 7 October—the attack on the kibbutzim and the music festival, the murder and kidnapping of so many people, and the treatment of those held hostage. Those were dreadful events, each and every one of them, but to visit a kibbutz and to hear how the attack unfolded there—armed paragliders descending on the kibbutz in the early hours of a Saturday morning, and the murder and kidnapping of its members—was frankly shocking. It also took the IDF more than 24 hours to get to those people, and even longer to safely escort them to safety, and that was heartrending.

The actions of Hamas on that date and beyond were monstrous. The woman who showed us around the kibbutz lost her home and her son, a father of three, on that day, but when we asked her what she does now, she told us that she does what she has always done: she goes into schools to talk about peace. Many Israelis we spoke to expressed similar hopes; they have great hope that the elections next month will make a difference and that a public inquiry into the events of 7 October should be held, as the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) suggested.

Israelis are right to be saddened, angered and outraged by those events, but their Government’s response against the people of Gaza has been disproportionate and is a stain on the conscience of the world. However, the problems did not begin in 2023. Indeed, my late father was stationed in the middle east during the second world war. He loved the region, but was depressed by what he saw then and by what unfolded in subsequent decades.

I am proud that this Government have recognised the state of Palestine, and I am even more proud that we are now committed to banning the sale of goods and services from settlements. I am also proud that we have taken such a strong leadership role internationally to get to this point. The international effort is crucial if there is to be progress.

However, let us be under no illusion. When we talk about settlements, we are not talking about small villages with rudimentary services and a rural lifestyle. Many are large industrial towns with successful industries and excellent public services, most are strategically placed to prevent a Palestinian state from ever being contiguous, and all of them are illegal. E1 is potentially vast, and it is just the latest addition to that policy, which is not new. In Hebron, the second largest city in the west bank, a settlement was created in the middle of the city in 1968, and as a result the city centre is a ghost town.

We see on our televisions and online the extreme actions of the settlers, and I will come back to that, but we should not underestimate for a moment the sheer grind that Palestinians in the west bank experience each and every day as they try to go about their lives—checkpoints, roads that are off limits to Palestinian cars and commercial activity, or just off limits to Palestinians full stop. The village of Khirbet Zanuta in the south Hebron hills was home to some 250 Palestinians who were forced off their land by settlers after a campaign of harassment and intimidation.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is giving a very thoughtful, detailed and balanced speech, and I am grateful for that. A report by the West Bank Protection Consortium documents forced nudity, invasive searches, sexual harassment and threats of sexual violence against Palestinian women, men and children. It found that sexual violence against women and girls was a factor in families deciding to leave their homes. Does she agree that, where sexual violence is used to intimidate and forcibly displace Palestinians, we must make it clear to the Israeli Government that those responsible must be held to account?

Patricia Ferguson: Indeed, I agree with my hon. Friend. We heard of examples of that when we visited this year, and it is of course deliberate. It consists of incidents such as she describes, but also of people peering in windows and polluting watercourses used usually by the women of a village. That kind of behaviour is just not acceptable.

The villagers of Khirbet Zanuta won a Supreme Court ruling that they could return to their village, and many of them did, but they were forced out again. This time, the settlers bulldozed the village, including its school, which had been built in part with UK taxpayers' money. At Umm al-Khair, we saw how settler outposts had expanded directly alongside the village and heard about the death of Awdah Hathaleen in July 2025. Awdah was shot dead by Yinon Levi, a settler already sanctioned by the UK Government. Despite video evidence—and I mean really strong video evidence—no charges have ever been brought and no prosecution has taken place.

We visited the American co-ordination centre in Kiryat Gat, and I have to say that was quite an unreal experience. There are military personnel from about 20 countries working on aid delivery, monitoring the ceasefire and planning the reconstruction of Gaza. We discussed with an Israeli army officer the distribution of aid in Gaza, and our concerns about the designation of many items as potentially of dual use and as a consequence banned from Gaza. This included items such as tent poles, therapeutic toys for children and cochlear implants for children. We also met the Norwegian Refugee Council. Its assessment of the volume and effectiveness of humanitarian aid could not have been more at odds with what we heard at Kiryat Gat.

Whatever the facts of the matter are, it is clear that the humanitarian situation is still dire and that life for Palestinians in Gaza is a question of survival rather than living. With little in the way of healthcare and education, it would be helpful if the Minister closing the debate could indicate whether we will expand our support for Palestinian students wishing to study in the UK, and for injured and sick Palestinians struggling to access healthcare. It is a sad fact—actually, it is not sad; it is horrifying—that Gaza has per capita the highest number of child amputees in the world, many of whom have not had access to proper treatment, rehabilitation or appropriate prosthetics. We must do more to help.

The way ahead will not be easy, but the only way forward is for a safe and secure Israel to be able to live with a safe and secure Palestine as its neighbour. Hopefully, that aim will be helped by the election of a new Government in just over a month, and the continuing efforts of the Government and their international partners. I was struck by something my hon. Friend the Member for

Wirral West (Matthew Patrick) said in his speech. I was reminded of a comment made at the time of the Good Friday agreement, which is—I will close on this—that you don't make peace by talking to your friends.

8.11 pm

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): I was unable to attend the House last week when the Foreign Secretary made his statement on Israel and Palestine, so I wanted to take this opportunity to put on record my support for what he proposed.

On the day of the announcement, I tuned into Radio 4's "Six o'clock News". Included in the headlines was a sentence from what the Foreign Secretary had said. Also broadcast were some of the comments made by the Father of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), when he, too, supported what the Foreign Secretary said. He added how much he admired the Jewish people and their faith, but deeply regretted what is happening on the west bank. It is in that context that I make clear that I share my right hon. Friend's views of the Jewish people. He said he was a Conservative Friend of Israel. I, too, put myself in that category. My criticisms are of the Israeli Government.

After the appalling events of 7 October, it was inevitable that there would be a response from the Israelis, and rightly so, but tens of thousands of Palestinians have been killed, many of them children. Surely, it would have been possible to target the leaders of Hamas without the loss of those innocent Palestinian lives? I can understand the determination of Israel to take an extremely robust approach to defending itself, when there are those in the region who want to wipe the country from the face of the map. Its actions in that respect are justified, but I ask the Israeli Government why that involves repeated violations of international law. If the international community seriously believes in a two-state solution, we need to call out Israeli policy for what it is: action to prevent that ever happening.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way; he is generous with his time. Is he aware that both the Prime Minister and the alternative Prime Minister in Israel have both said, in terms, that they do not accept the idea of the entity of a Palestinian state?

Martin Vickers: I was aware that Ministers in Israel had indicated that. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention.

As I say, if the international community is serious in its support of a two-state solution, it needs to call out the fact that Israel is deliberately implementing policies to thwart that. I can understand and fully support Israel as the home of the Jewish people. They should therefore recognise the desire for the Palestinian people to have their own homeland.

When I was elected in 2010, my focus was entirely on my constituency. I was determined to earn myself a second term. During the five years of the coalition Government, if memory serves me correctly, I undertook just two foreign trips. I was mindful of the fact that the Israel-Palestine issue might well come to the fore and that I might have to make a decision on it, so I travelled to Israel. My first visit was actually to Gaza. Interestingly enough, when we got to the border we had a call from the consulate in Jerusalem advising us not to cross the

border, but having got that far, we were determined and insisted on crossing over. I witnessed the tragedy of what the residents there had to face—it is much worse now, of course—and the events I witnessed had a considerable impact on how I viewed this seemingly never-ending dispute. In October 2014, I was one of 39 Conservative Members who supported a motion to recognise Palestine. Sadly, only three of those Conservatives remain, one of whom, the Father of the House, I mentioned earlier. I appreciate that to some extent it is only symbolic, but nevertheless it is extremely important.

Returning to last week's announcement, how effective it will be remains to be seen. One thing is certain: public opinion is broadly supportive. The views expressed in my inbox, and by those who visit my surgery to raise the issue, are most certainly critical of Israel—I should be more specific and say the Israeli Government. One particular constituent I have in mind is so passionate about the issue—she comes to see me on repeat occasions—that she will be absolutely delighted. Though I say to the House, as I said to my constituent, who regularly travels to London to take part in the many demonstrations, and contrary to the views expressed by a Member earlier, I do not think that the continued demonstrations are actually beneficial to the Palestinian cause.

Israel is an ally, a democracy and a nation that, as I said at the outset, has every right to exist and to defend itself. I fully support that, but its Government need to recognise that they are losing further support. If they continue with their illegal acts, that will only continue.

8.16 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): I, too, put on the record my thanks to the Minister's predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), for all the work he has done to get us to this place, and to the Minister and his team for all the work they are doing at the moment, particularly last week.

I welcome today's general debate on Israel and Palestine. It is a timely debate that rightly deserves the attention of the House. There will, no doubt, be a small minority online who will ask why events thousands of miles away should take up time in the British Parliament, so let me address that from the outset.

First, Britain does not exist on a planet of its own, detached from the rest of the world. What happens beyond our shores has consequences here at home. We also have a particular historic and moral responsibility when it comes to Israel and Palestine, given the Balfour declaration, the British mandate and our country's historical role in the region. But even putting that history aside, whether we like it or not, conflicts elsewhere affect the lives of people right here in Britain. A war in Ukraine, a war involving Iran or instability across the middle east can mean higher prices at the petrol pump, higher energy bills, greater inflationary pressures and, ultimately, higher borrowing costs for families. More fundamentally, growing instability around the world threatens the peace, security and freedoms upon which all our lives depend. Britain therefore has both an interest and a responsibility in seeking peace, upholding international law and preventing further conflict.

Secondly, we cannot discuss this conflict without confronting the extraordinary loss of human life. According to figures published by the United Nations, more than

73,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza since 7 October 2023. More than 21,700 of those killed have been children—21,700 children.

Ayoub Khan: The hon. Member may be aware that the United Nations inquiry revealed that the IDF was intentionally targeting children as a way to end the future generation. That inquiry should prompt this Government to take even further steps towards sanctions.

Naz Shah: Certainly, the Secretary of State highlighted in his remarks last Tuesday that the Government will seek advice from the ICJ and are continuously supporting those inquiries, but the hon. Member makes an important point.

Sadly, we live in a world where we can go about our daily lives and not always feel the seriousness of the pain in Gaza, or comprehend the magnitude of the killing. Putting those thousands of deaths to one side for a moment, as mothers and fathers, in this Chamber and beyond, can we not feel the pain being felt by the people of Gaza? I recently saw a video of a father who believed his child was dead, only to be reunited with his son more than two years later, having thought that he had been killed and buried beneath the rubble of Gaza's destruction. He holds his son, pulls him close and cries uncontrollably, completely overwhelmed with emotion.

Can we imagine being that father? If we had lost our child, can we imagine the happiness, relief and overwhelming emotion of that moment of being reunited? That is one story that at least has some happiness at the end, and it makes us tear up because we imagine, "What if this was my child? What if this was your child?" But I ask: how do those mothers who will never see their beloved children again feel; those fathers who will never again hold their children tightly to their chests; those children growing up in Gaza with no mother, no father, no guardian and no shelter?

What is it like to live in a conflict zone where someone who is a journalist, like Hamza al-Dahdouh, can be killed in an Israeli airstrike, or, like Shireen Abu Akleh, can be shot dead while doing their job? Years later there is still no accountability to bring about justice for their families.

It is a conflict zone where someone can be a British, Australian, Canadian or Palestinian aid worker for the World Central Kitchen, trying to provide basic food and humanitarian assistance to people living among the rubble, and be killed by the IDF. The seven World Central Kitchen workers were travelling in a clearly marked convoy and co-ordinating their movements with the Israeli military. Three of those killed were British. They were returning from delivering food and humanitarian assistance to people in Gaza when their vehicles were struck. Their deaths show the extraordinary danger faced by aid workers trying to feed civilians in a warzone. Israel acknowledged serious failures in the strike and dismissed two officers, yet the families of the World Central Kitchen workers have called for independent accountability—that call is falling on deaf ears.

That is the treatment of journalists, aid workers and others whose very purpose is to help and bear witness. So where is the justice, the accountability and the protection of life for everyone in Gaza? God forbid you stand up and consistently speak out against the oppression, killing and destruction of the Palestinian people, and call for

[Naz Shah]

sanctions in line with international law and the position of successive British Governments for decades—the response is that Israel sanctions people like me.

Tahir Ali: If speaking up against war crimes, ethnic cleansing and genocide means being banned from entering that country, my hon. Friend should wear it as a badge of honour. She should be proud of that. However, should the rules be applied equally to Israeli diplomats in this House? When China banned our elected Members, the Speaker banned the Chinese ambassador from coming to this place. I would like that to be repeated in equal measure to the Israeli ambassador.

Naz Shah: My hon. Friend makes his point strongly, and I was coming on to reference China.

If the intention of sanctioning me was to silence me, it will not work. Israel cannot call itself the only democracy in the middle east and then sanction British parliamentarians for speaking out. China previously sanctioned Members of this Parliament for speaking out over human rights abuses in Xinjiang, as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley (Tahir Ali) pointed out. Those sanctions did not silence British parliamentarians, and nor will these.

The justice and equality that I, and many others in this Chamber, fight for does not consider someone's nationality, faith, ethnic background or who someone is. If more than 73,000 Palestinians are killed in Gaza; if Palestinian land in the occupied west bank is taken through illegal settlements; if Palestinians are being forcibly displaced and subjected to what many international experts and human rights organisations have described as ethnic cleansing; and if the viability of an independent state of Palestine, alongside a state of Israel, is being systematically undermined, eroding every opportunity for a two-state solution and lasting peace in the middle east, then I have a moral duty to speak up. And if innocent Jewish people are murdered, as they were by Hamas in the horrific attacks of 7 October, when around 1,200 people were killed, then I have the same moral duty to speak up and call that out.

Outside of this conflict, I have stood shoulder to shoulder with the minority Christian community in Jaranwala in Pakistan against their persecution. The justice that I believe in means that I have a moral duty to stand with them too.

Additionally, in response to the Government's measures to prohibit trade with illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied west bank, the Israeli Government announced that they would close the British consulate general in East Jerusalem. The measures were taken alongside France and Canada, with other international partners also supporting action to protect the two-state solution. Yet Israel chose to direct its retaliation principally against the United Kingdom. That is not the conduct that we should expect from an ally. It looks like an ally lashing out because Britain has chosen to uphold international law.

There is also a fundamental question about Israel's legal authority to take that action. It is not the British embassy in Israel; it is the British consulate general, which represents the United Kingdom in Jerusalem,

the west bank and Gaza, and conducts our relations with Palestine. We must see those three areas as one entity, because that is what they are.

East Jerusalem is occupied territory. The International Court of Justice has confirmed that Israel holds the status of an occupying power there, and that Israeli sovereignty over East Jerusalem is not internationally recognised. Israel may exercise the practical power to force the consulate's closure, but practical control is not the same as lawful sovereignty. By what legal right, then, do the Israeli Government seek to close a British diplomatic mission in occupied East Jerusalem?

I also want to bring to the House's attention today's report by B'Tselem, an Israeli human rights group. It is the most comprehensive report to date on the west bank, gathering evidence from over three decades of Israel's human rights violations and 2,000 testimonies since October 2023. The report is called "The Elimination Project". It shows the correlation between the widespread destruction of homes and infrastructure, the network of roadblocks and checkpoints, the attacks by armed settler militias, the expulsion of communities and the unprecedented expansion of settlements, outposts and farms. B'Tselem says that these are not separate phenomena; rather, they are part of an Israeli project to eliminate the Palestinian collective, in order to establish permanent Jewish Israeli control over the entire area.

The Israeli elimination project, according to B'Tselem, "did not begin with the current government,"

but since late 2022 a new phase has been entered, with faster and much broader deployment. Given that report today, I ask the Minister whether the Government will expedite the measures announced last week—the ban on trade with the occupied west bank and illegally occupied areas. This is really important.

The Foreign Secretary made it clear to this House last week that Britain is not powerless when international law is being torn apart. Once again, I commend the Prime Minister and the Government for demonstrating the power of international diplomacy, and for leading action, alongside France, Canada and other international partners, against illegal Israeli settlements and those who profit from them.

8.31 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Your Party): It is a pleasure to follow the speech from the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), who has made a huge contribution to supporting the Palestinian people over many years in this House.

This debate is obviously very welcome. I acknowledge that the Government's statement last week on resetting policy is a very important and highly significant change in Government policy. While I welcome some aspects of it, I feel that it does not go far enough, and it is taking far too long to bring what was announced into operation. It is also very unclear what kind of ultimate sanctions there would be against Israel in the event of it evading the sanctions concerning Israeli settlements, and what military co-operation there will be with Israel in the future. These things must be clarified. I hope that when the Minister replies, we will learn a little more about the details of the policy, and in particular why the Government have given themselves so many months to bring it into operation.

Succeeding generations will ask very serious questions of all of us politicians. Our children are taught in school the horrors of the Holocaust against the Jewish people, and of so many other genocides around the world. They are taught the way in which racism leads into that horrible scenario. They will ask why we were unable to do anything to prevent the massive loss of life in Gaza at the hands of the Israeli forces.

As the hon. Member for Bradford West pointed out, 73,000 people have been killed in Gaza. Those millions of tonnes of rubble hide many more bodies. The Israel Defence Forces will cart some of the rubble away, so that it can become hardcore for buildings in Israel, but there will be bodies in that rubble. There will be human remains there and DNA evidence. We are seeing the most massive killing of innocent civilian life in Gaza, and we have not been able to stop it; it still carries on. There are many statistics that one could quote, but a simple one is this: it is estimated that there are 63 million tonnes of rubble in Gaza. There are 2 million people in Gaza. That is more than 30 tonnes of rubble per person. Almost every building has been damaged or destroyed.

The destruction has moved on to the west bank, where settlers are destroying land, chopping down olive trees, polluting wells, driving people out of their homes, burning villages and driving people away. That is the sort of activity that the frontiersmen from Europe—the white people who invaded native American land in the wild west—undertook against Indian villagers. That is the equivalent of the horror that is going on there.

Sometimes we seem to pretend that we can continue normal relations with Israel, but these are not random illegal acts, committed by people acting alone; these acts are condoned by the Government of Israel. The settlers are protected and armed by Israeli police and the IDF. It gets worse and worse. As many colleagues have pointed out, the idea of a contiguous Palestinian state disappears if E1 is settled in the way that the E1 plan proposes.

That is not the end of it. Israeli forces are now occupying a very large part of southern Lebanon, and it looks to me as though they have every intention of remaining there. Israel is also taking part in the wholly illegal bombardment of Iran, alongside President Trump. Is it not time that we were a bit stronger and more assertive against these wholly illegal acts? The Government have made it very clear that they recognise international law and international legal instruments, and that they expect every other country to do the same. Good—that also applies to Israel.

When the Foreign Secretary made his statement, very interestingly he acknowledged the role that public opinion in Britain has had in bringing about this change in policy. I have been on a very large number of marches about Palestine, and there are probably about a million people in Britain who have made their voices very clearly heard, either by attending a demonstration or sending letters, emails, petitions—all sorts of things. The marches are made up of large numbers of people, some of whom have never been involved in anything political at all before. They are a very wide range of people; they are Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, atheist and humanist. It is very clear that we will not allow any of the marches to descend into any kind of racist hate speech. They are marches of support and solidarity with people who are

victims of the most atrocious bombardment. I thank all those people who have come along and made their voices very well heard.

It is important that the Government go a bit further on accepting the process of international law. I attended the ICJ hearing for the South African application. It was a deeply moving experience to sit there in the Peace Palace in the Hague—a beautiful, stunning building—listening to the South African application. My mind went back to the apartheid years—all the demonstrations to try to bring about an end to apartheid, and the bravery and all the suffering of the South African people in trying to throw off the yoke of apartheid. I thought, “How brave of South Africa to present that case.” What was their reward? Extra tariffs and tax by President Trump.

Later, I was in South Africa with my good friend Dr Mustafa Barghouti, addressing a meeting in Cape Town about Palestine. At the meeting was an elderly man who had been part of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. He had been very badly beaten by the South African army and police force while he was campaigning to end apartheid in his country. He got up and said that the treatment of the people of Palestine is far worse than anything that happened to the black community in South Africa. There was not carpet-bombing of cities and villages there, of the sort that the Israeli forces are carrying out.

If we respect international law, then arrest warrants issued by the ICC for a number of individuals in the Israeli Government must be enforced, should those individuals show up in this country. As my hon. Friends the Members for Blackburn (Mr Hussain) and for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) pointed out, if the ICJ considers that acts of genocide could be committed—that is its opinion, and it is a very important opinion—then anyone who provides arms to Israel and provides support for acts of genocide becomes complicit in genocide. I hope that the Government understand the dangers of all that. I hope that we will be very assertive about what the settlers and settlements are doing, and that we will impose real sanctions against Israel.

We must recognise that although the Israeli body politic, including all the major parties, essentially supports the strategy pursued by Netanyahu—perhaps in mildly different forms, but fundamentally they are of the same mind—there are people in Israel who absolutely oppose what their Government are doing and absolutely detest the way in which the Palestinian people are being treated. Are we to be silent bystanders while these ghastly acts of genocide go on—as people are denied food and decent medical facilities?

As other Members have pointed out, Britain’s role in all this is not one of a recent arriviste on the scene. We have been involved since the 19th century in the issue of settlements, and in preventing the Palestinian people from asserting their statehood. We were obviously involved in the Balfour declaration and the secret Sykes-Picot agreement. For historical reasons, moral reasons and reasons of courage, we should be far clearer about our role in all this. We must bring peace and justice to all the peoples of the region and oppose racism in absolutely any form in society, in this country or anywhere else.

I am conscious that other colleagues wish to speak, so the last thing I will say is this. I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill calling for a public inquiry into Britain’s policy

[Jeremy Corbyn]

in Gaza, like the Franks report into previous conflicts and Sir John Chilcot's inquiry into Britain's policy on Iraq, because we need to know what was going on in the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence, and what was happening at RAF Akrotiri and in other places. When it became clear that the Bill would not make any progress in the House, Professor Neve Gordon, Dr Shahd Hammouri and I put together a tribunal. We held a Gaza inquiry over two days in Church House Westminster, and we heard from 29 expert witnesses. It was a deeply moving occasion. We listened to young people from Gaza explain what their life had been like. We listened to medical practitioners talk about the horror of doing everything they had been taught that they could not do: they had inflicted pain on people to try to prevent further pain, and had amputated the limbs of children without anaesthetic, antiseptic or even water. After all their heroic work, they would think that, only a few kilometres away from where they were operating in ghastly conditions under a piece of canvas, there was food, water, electricity, medicine and antiseptic—everything that was needed—but it was deliberately denied to the Palestinian people by the IDF.

Aid workers have been killed. As was said earlier, the limited aid that gets in is deliberately designed to prevent a sustainable way of life in Gaza. Some foodstuffs can be imported, but potato tubers and seeds, which could be used to develop agriculture for the future, cannot. Our Gaza inquiry pointed out the depravity of what was going on. I thank everyone who took part in it, but I want a proper public inquiry, so that we know what those surveillance flights were doing. The former Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, said that there are things going on at RAF Akrotiri that he was not able to talk about. It is time that somebody talked about what is going on there, because we need to know the truth. The truth will help set us free. I believe that the truth will help bring about what is essential: peace and justice for the people of Palestine.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. After the next speaker, I will have to impose a speaking limit to get in the remaining 10 people in the next hour. Please bear that in mind, if you have to correct your speeches.

8.44 pm

Dr Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is an honour to speak in the debate. There have been endless debates on this subject since I became a Member of Parliament. What can be done in Israel-Palestine so that all its inhabitants may live in peace and tranquillity, with none to make them afraid? Those are the lines of the sacred prayer for peace that we say in our synagogues every shabbat. We have prayed in vain for what seems like an eternity, and here in Parliament we have endlessly debated this.

Since the dreadful attacks of 7 October, the seizing of hostages and the mass destruction in Gaza, there have been countless debates and questions to Ministers. Last year, the Government recognised the state of Palestine,

fulfilling a manifesto commitment. That was controversial at the time as there were still hostages, but I supported it, for the formal recognition of a Palestinian state separate from a secure Israel is the two-state solution that we all know must come and it represented the repudiation of Hamas and its sinister refrain, "From the river to the sea".

Now we have a fresh package of sanctions, internationally co-ordinated. The need to act at a time when we see increasing settler violence and so little progress in Gaza seemed urgent. That, I am sure, is the view of our new Foreign Secretary, for whom I have the greatest respect. However, I worry about the timing of the announcement, for the Knesset is dissolved and there is an election in Israel. I fear that the attitude of the Netanyahu Government will simply harden and the electorate may swing behind Netanyahu in reaction. That is the very last thing we want. What I would like to see is surely what many hon. Members would like to see: a new Government in Israel with a completely new approach.

This weekend, we celebrated the Jewish new year, Rosh Hashanah, for 5787. I wish all hon. Members a happy and peaceful new year. Next Monday is Yom Kippur, a holy day of repentance. Let us politicians pray for progress and pray for peace.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. There will be a speaking limit of six minutes.

8.46 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Last week's statement from the Foreign Secretary marked a significant moment in British policy on Israel and Palestine. I congratulate Ministers on those changes. For years, the Liberal Democrats have argued that simply declaring the west bank settlements illegal while otherwise continuing business as usual was not enough. The Government appear to have conceded that words need to be matched with actions. The Government agree that things have gone on for long enough and have recognised the occupation as unlawful. They have recognised that a ban on imports is necessary and that further sanctions on extremist settlers are required. Those are positive steps, but the reality in the region remains bleak.

Benjamin Netanyahu and his Cabinet have rejected proposals for peace and declared that a Palestinian state will not be recognised while he remains Prime Minister. At the same time, Hamas remains a terrorist organisation that has shown no convincing sign that it will disarm or dismantle itself. Hamas is a transnational actor and a transnational threat, as indeed we saw just last week with the arrest of seven suspected Hamas members in Germany as part of a terror plot.

On the ground in Israel and Palestine, the prospects for a two-state solution are being systematically undermined. The Foreign Affairs Committee saw that when we visited the Jordan valley last year. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Stratford and Bow (Uma Kumaran), saw as I did how escalating settler violence meant villages were subjected to intimidation. Now, with the announcement of the E1 settlement, there are blatant attempts to make a viable contiguous Palestinian state impossible.

There has been some debate tonight about the timing of the Government's announcement, with a suggestion that somehow they might be meddling in the affairs of Israel as it approaches its election. I have to disagree with the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Dr Prinsley). If the Government are convinced that more sanctions are required, they have a responsibility to introduce them as soon as they make that determination and not await the internal democratic electoral affairs of the Israeli state. Indeed, to have delayed would have been interference in the domestic affairs of Israel.

I welcome the fact that the Government have finally acted. I welcome the fact that the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister have acknowledged that the previous Administration did not go far enough. I also welcome the decision to ban settlement goods connected to settlement expansion, but I call for the Government to go further and adopt a ban on all services and trade with those settlements, just as the Dutch Government have done. If the settlements are unlawful, the financial and commercial structures that sustain them should enjoy no benefit from trade with the UK.

Sanctions are a similar story. The Government have recently sanctioned extremist figures such as National Security Minister Ben Gvir and Finance Minister Smotrich, who have repeatedly demonstrated their disdain not just for a Palestinian state but for the Palestinian people themselves. These sanctions should be extended to all members of the Cabinet who are complicit in illegal settlement expansion, forced displacement and the ongoing erosion of a Palestinian state, and that includes Netanyahu himself. Accountability cannot rest just with the most extremist members of the security cabinet if others are enabling the same agenda.

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has said that Israel's forced displacement of more than 33,000 Palestinians in the west bank could amount to crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing. It is the largest and longest displacement crisis since 1967. Meanwhile in Gaza, the scale of death and destruction has shocked the conscience of the world. This Government say that there is increasing evidence that war crimes may have been committed and that they support the ICJ in reaching its determination in relation to genocide. I understand that the Government desire to defer to a competent court, but I note that it took nine years between the atrocities being carried out against the Yazidi people in 2014 and the recognition by the British Government in 2023 that Daesh had committed a genocide.

Hamas remain a terrorist organisation and there can be no future peace while armed groups backed by Iran retain the capacity to threaten Israeli civilians and sabotage any political settlement. Their disarmament and disbandment must be part of any lasting solution.

Tahir Ali: On the issue of disarmament, should we not also be calling for Israel's disarmament, given the atrocities that have been committed? Previous Governments have intervened in the middle east to take action on human rights abuses and protect international trade routes. Is it not about time that military action was taken against Israel as well?

Richard Foord: The peace plan requires the IDF to pull back from Gaza just as Hamas disarm, so I see the onus on the IDF to pull back, just as Hamas must disarm.

As far as this state is concerned, Hamas are a terrorist organisation, and I do not draw any equivalence between the state of Israel, internationally recognised, and Hamas as a proscribed terrorist organisation.

Yes, last week's shift in British Government policy represents a welcome change in direction. It is a break from years of denial, hesitation and inaction, but the British Government have further to go. They have further to go before Britain is fully matching its commitment to international law, accountability and the two-state solution that remains the path to a just and lasting peace for Israelis and Palestinians.

8.53 pm

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): My remarks today will focus on the murder of healthcare workers in Palestine and on the tremendous work of Jewish-led organisations that campaign against the illegal occupation.

There is one moment that will always stick with me from my last two and a half years as an MP. On 24 June 2025, I was making my way to the Chamber for oral questions when I received a phone call from my colleague, Dr Rebecca Inglis of Healthcare Workers Watch. She told me that a GP like myself who worked in Gaza had just been shot in the head by an Israeli soldier. More than 2,000 healthcare workers and 595 humanitarian aid workers have been murdered at the hands of the Israeli army, and 95 Palestinian healthcare workers remain detained by the Israeli authorities and subjected to the most inhumane conditions and reported torture.

Despite even the ceasefire, this goes on. In fact, a UN commission found that the Israeli state had committed the crime of genocide through deliberate targeting of the Gazan healthcare system. The practice is not restricted to Gaza; it took place in Syria and Sudan as well. It has a new name—healthocide—and this British Government must fight against it. Over 90% of the Gaza strip's healthcare infrastructure has been either destroyed or damaged. Cables have been cut to stop people in Gaza getting proper healthcare. I have heard directly from British doctors in the area who have witnessed the deliberate destruction of medical equipment in front of their eyes.

This healthocide extends to the west bank. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Dr Prinsley) and I were denied access when we tried to look at the healthcare facilities in the west bank approximately a year ago. The Israelis have withheld billions of dollars of tax revenue from the Palestinian Authority, which means that healthcare workers are not being paid. Some have not been paid for the last six months, so workers are cutting their hours and clinics have had to close. I found out today from Medical Aid for Palestinians that healthcare workers have to wear bullet-proof vests when they go outside because they are being targeted by Israeli forces.

Medical staff are regularly harassed, ambulances' movements are restricted, and checkpoint delays are costing lives when every minute matters in medical emergencies. Things are getting worse. The WHO said that in June of this year there were eight attacks on healthcare workers, and in July there were 37 attacks. Also in July, a four-month-old Palestinian boy died after Israeli forces at a military checkpoint west of Ramallah prevented his transfer to a hospital.

[*Dr Simon Opher*]

I agree with our Prime Minister: our party's rhetoric and our Government's actions have been totally inadequate in response to these atrocities, but we are now beginning to right that wrong. We have a Foreign Secretary who has restored dignity and credibility in this Chamber, and we have a Government who are finally acknowledging that war crimes have been committed and that the occupation is illegal, and they have backed it up with meaningful action—a Government who will stand up and not stand by. It is long overdue, and we must go further, but it is such a welcome change.

I want to end my speech on a positive note. Amid all the horror of the last few years, there have been people who have refused to give up on the possibility of peace. I pay tribute to two brilliant Jewish-led organisations, Standing Together and Na'amod. Standing Together brings Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel together around a simple belief: that the future of one people cannot be built on the destruction of another. Here in Britain, Na'amod have shown extraordinary moral courage. They are a movement of British Jews campaigning against the occupation for the freedom and dignity of Palestinians. I was proud to be hosting them here in Parliament two hours ago.

I am glad that our Government will no longer be bystanders, but we must be bolder and move faster. We must use every lever possible to help to bring this illegal occupation to an end, because history will judge us on whether we did enough when it really mattered.

8.57 pm

Lara Bird (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): I want to start by congratulating the latest iteration of the Labour Government for finally growing a backbone and doing what anybody with a moral conscience would and should have done years ago. While I genuinely welcome the statement and the sanctions that were announced last week—I really do—it is crucial that we remember that this is not the end goal, and that we do not lose sight of just how long Israel has been conducting violence and terror against the Palestinian people, and how long the UK Government have known in detail and failed to do anything about it.

It was 25 years ago that Israel constructed a wall in the occupied west bank, barricading Palestinians in, separating families, denying them access to their land and enforcing a regime of illegal annexation and apartheid—treating an entire population like they were animals. The UK Government knew that and did nothing. It was 22 years ago that the ICJ confirmed that the construction of that wall was an unlawful use of force and violated international law. At the time, the UK Government accepted that and still did nothing. It was 20 years ago that the UK Government accepted that Israel was systematically abusing human rights in Palestine. There was a Labour Government at the time, and yet no action was taken because there was no political will to do so.

For decades, successive UK Governments have known in detail the level of harm that Palestinians have suffered at the hands of the Israeli Government—arbitrary detention, torture, burning farms and farmland, killing children, destroying entire villages. Members of Parliament from across this House have gone to the west bank and seen it with their own eyes, and yet no action has been taken.

There have been debates and statements of condemnation, and yet thousands of Palestinians have been killed, thousands of homes have been destroyed and thousands of children will grow up without their parents because the UK Government had no political incentive to act.

I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) for raising the murder of Awdah Hathaleen, who was murdered a year ago by an Israeli settler in the village of Umm al-Kheir. Awdah was a friend of mine. I knew him well, and I grieve his murder every single day. Awdah was known to this House, because in 2024 he visited Westminster and spoke to parliamentarians. He visited Government officials in the FCDO and detailed the horror of living under illegal occupation in the west bank. He asked the UK Government to act and, at the time, they did not. Just think: how many Palestinian lives could have been spared if the UK Government 25 years ago had acted on the information and the facts that were in front of them. How many Israeli lives could have been spared?

I might be new to this House, but I have watched every single debate in this place on Palestine and Israel, not just for the last three years since the genocide but for years before that. I will not make any friends when I say this, but I am so disappointed at how few Members across the House have raised their head above the parapet to condemn the UK Government's continued support of Israel, and at how so many Members are doing so now just because it is politically convenient for them to do so.

I genuinely welcome the statement given by the Government last week and genuinely hope that this causes a change, and that it saves Palestinian lives. But I cannot forgive, and so many others will never forget just how long it has taken the UK Government to finally do the right thing.

9.2 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I have had the privilege of visiting the west bank on two occasions on visits organised by Caabu—the Council for Arab-British Understanding—and by Yachad. I put on the record my interests in respect of both those visits.

On the second occasion, I also visited some of the kibbutz communities in the south of Israel, which suffered horrific losses in the atrocities committed by Hamas on 7 October 2023. They were extraordinary conversations with people who had lost their loved ones, who had suffered the most horrific violence in their communities, who had been and continued to be long-term peace campaigners and who were still committed to working for peace. They included Maoz Inon, who has written so movingly with his Palestinian friend, Aziz Abu Sarah, about their hopes for peace in his book, “The Future is Peace”. I commend that book to the House. That visit was extraordinarily humbling.

In the west bank, we visited communities that had been the subject of settler terrorism. In Turmus Ayya, we met Palestinians whose homes had been burned and who faced constant harassment, intimidation and threats from settlers. In the village of Zanuta near Hebron, we spoke with members of a 250-strong community who had been threatened that if they did not leave, they would be killed. A month after they left, the settlers came and destroyed the whole village, including a council building funded by the EU and the UK Government.

We stood in the ruins of two schools, again funded by the EU and the UK Government, that had been razed to the ground by settlers, and we saw the decades-long desolation in Hebron where Palestinians have been banned from their homes.

We also saw settlement after settlement after settlement—new homes and communities—built on land from which Palestinians had been displaced. It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that this activity is, as the Foreign Secretary said last week, ethnic cleansing and strategically designed to undermine the possibility of a two-state solution. The E1 settlement takes this even further, aiming to divide the west bank north from south and sever it from East Jerusalem. As a former town planner, I can say that it is simply the use of the planning system as a tool of oppression—an attempt to make a two-state solution impossible.

I welcome the Government's decision to recognise the state of Palestine—there cannot be a two-state solution without two states—but it is a source of frustration and deep regret that it has taken so long to see action to stop funding from the UK through trade supporting and sustaining illegal settlements. Clarity on human rights and international law is in everyone's interests and words must be backed up by meaningful action. I welcome the ban on trade in goods and services from illegal settlements, and I welcome the Government's confirmation that they agree with the International Court of Justice that Israel's occupation of the west bank and Gaza is unlawful. I welcome the Foreign Secretary's moral clarity on the utter horror of the situation in Gaza, where the scale of death and destruction is unimaginable and people are living in utterly desperate circumstances. The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) has rightly described it as a "moral catastrophe".

As the Government have announced meaningful action, may I press the Minister on the urgency of the humanitarian situation in Gaza? The Israeli Government must allow essential items, such as prosthetic limbs, crutches and wheelchairs, into Gaza, as well as permitting more medical specialists to enter Gaza to meet the needs of its population. The Israeli Government must stop the killing. Will the Minister confirm which of the measures announced in recent days require legislation and confirm that the Government will take all measures possible to ensure that legislation is delivered as quickly as possible?

The situation in Israel and Palestine is so far away from a peaceful two-state solution and progress towards it will require sustained effort over a long period of time. Will my hon. Friend the Minister assure this House that he will leave no stone unturned in maintaining the clarity of the Government's position and ensuring that the position is always supported by meaningful action that furthers the cause of peace and the imperatives of justice and accountability?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Before moving on, I want to announce the results of the Select Committee elections held earlier today.

In the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee election, 463 votes were cast, of which three were invalid. There were 406 valid votes in the fifth round,

excluding those ballot papers whose preference had been exhausted. The quota to be reached, therefore, was 204 votes. The hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Ms Oppong-Asare) was elected with 242 votes.

In the Justice Committee election, 462 votes were cast, seven of which were invalid. There was a single round of counting, with 455 valid votes. The quota to be reached, therefore, was 228. [The hon. Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson) was elected chair with 250 votes.

In the Women and Equalities Committee election, 463 votes were cast, of which three were invalid. There were 421 valid votes. In the second round the quota to be reached was therefore 211. The hon. Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire (Olivia Bailey) was elected with 213 votes.

All three Chairs will take up their posts immediately. I congratulate them on their election and thank all who stood, and I thank the staff of the House who worked on these elections. The results of the counts were under the alternative vote system and will be made available as soon as possible in the Vote Office and on the internet.

We now return to the business before the House.

9.9 pm

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I will use my contribution to do two things: first, to reiterate that international law and human rights are absolutely critical, and secondly, to reflect on the responsibilities that they impose on the UK and on our wider responsibilities as parliamentarians and citizens.

International law and human rights frameworks are vital guiding principles. The terrorist atrocities of 7 October were a clear and obscene violation of those principles. Every single person responsible for those horrors must be held to account, and every life taken or damaged must never be forgotten. Equally, the collective punishment of the people of Gaza is also a clear and obscene violation of international law and breaches basic human rights. We see mass atrocities, displacement, deliberate starvation, the indiscriminate bombing of hospitals, withholding access to water and medical supplies, and the targeting of journalists and aid convoys. We must call what has been happening in Gaza what it is: genocide.

In the occupied west bank, we have seen the violent expansion of illegal settlements, ethnic cleansing, the execution of children, detention without trial, people forced to live under apartheid and settler terrorism. All of that has been happening for decades, but it is worse since 7 October, with Prime Minister Netanyahu emboldened by the current US President. Political leaders have largely fallen short when it comes to holding the Israeli Government to account for their human rights crimes and their flagrant disregard for international law, but political leaders come and go.

Meanwhile the international courts get on with their work upholding the standards and the UN resolutions that the world has collectively agreed. We need political leadership and we need it to be guided by international law and human rights frameworks, so it was hugely welcome to hear the Secretary of State last week recognise the 2024 ICJ conclusion that the occupation of Palestine is illegal, reiterate the illegality of expansionist settlements and take the vital first step of banning trade with and advertising of those illegal settlements. Their illegality is absolutely clear under international law.

[Dr Ellie Chowns]

The UK has done the right thing in recognising the role of international law and human rights standards, and it is starting to act accordingly, but genuine respect for international law and human rights means we cannot pick and choose. Suspending the licences of some arms used by the IDF in Gaza and the licensing of other arms and exports that materially contribute to the occupation makes a difference, but the double lock that the Government have announced does not include components for the F-35 combat aircraft that, according to Campaign Against The Arms Trade, is the most substantive part of the UK's arms trade with Israel. It cannot be beyond the wit of officialdom to find a way of tracing these parts, so that they are not used. The UK remains complicit in Israel's genocidal war crimes until it ends its role in supporting Israeli forces. I urge the UK Government to be consistent in their commitment to the legal and human rights frameworks that underpin their recent decisions. I welcome the steps they have taken, but it is too little, too late and there is much more to be done.

Secondly, I want to reflect on the wider responsibilities that we all have, especially as parliamentarians, in the context of rising hate crime and growing divisions in our communities. We each have a responsibility to show leadership, to stand against antisemitism, to stand against Islamophobia, not to conflate criticism of the Israeli Government with antisemitism and to call it out when we see others doing that, not to hold the Jewish people responsible for the actions of the Israeli authorities or the ideologies that drive them, and not to hold Palestinians responsible for the actions of Hamas.

We have a responsibility to recognise the many ways in which those who advocate for Palestine are defamed, often as antisemitic, as a way of shutting down or silencing their advocacy, and to recognise the damage that that does by distracting from critical work identifying and confronting antisemitism, which is so crucial at a time when attacks on Jewish communities and Jewish spaces in this country and around the world are increasing.

We have a responsibility to recognise anti-Palestinian racism and the multiple ways it manifests itself in our politics and society: a responsibility to stop putting people in boxes, to stop defining them as either allies or enemies with nothing in between, and a responsibility to resist the whipping up of hatred and the way in which nuance, understanding and compassion are being bludgeoned to extinction in public discourse.

All of us need to show leadership in our dialogue, in our constituencies, communities and our own parties, and to demonstrate in our words and our deeds that there is no competition or contradiction between supporting and defending Palestinian human rights, and supporting and defending thriving Jewish communities here in our country.

I am making these points in this debate because the response to what is happening in Palestine and Israel is being used by some political actors here in the UK to whip up antisemitism; by some to advance anti-migrant and anti-Muslim agendas; by some to justify chilling restrictions on civil liberties and our right to free speech and to peacefully protest; and by some to stoke division between minoritised communities. Leadership requires being alive to those realities and risks and recognising how they might prevent the emergence of shared visions

of justice, democracy, human rights and religious and political pluralism. That underscores the importance of defending and upholding the international legal and human rights frameworks that we already have fully and wholeheartedly.

Twenty-five years ago, I took up a job co-ordinating the UK arm of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel. I was an atheist working for a Christian organisation with Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities in the lands of Israel and Palestine to build peace. The spirit of working across boundaries is the only thing that will get us to peace and justice.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): As a result of the interlude, Back Benchers are now on a five-minute speaking limit.

9.15 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): The Government's decision last week to ban trade with illegal Israeli settlements, strengthen sanctions and state clearly that Israel's ongoing occupation of Palestinian territory is unlawful was very welcome. The humanitarian situation in Gaza remains appalling. There have been more than 1,303 fatalities and 4,336 injuries in Gaza since the ceasefire began in October 2025, with children being the most affected. Two thirds of the population still face critical, emergency levels of hunger, according to the World Food Programme, and the water situation is catastrophic, with Gazans dependent on water trucks normally reserved for the immediate aftermath of a crisis. Although more aid is now getting in, for a long time that was not the case, with Israel restricting lifesaving supplies, leading to a man-made famine being declared in August 2025 by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification famine review committee.

Additionally, for the past three years Gaza has been the deadliest place on earth to be a humanitarian, making up more than half of the humanitarian deaths around the world. It is in that context that my constituent James Henderson—Jim—was providing vital security support for World Central Kitchen in Gaza in 2024. A former Royal Marine, his family say that he was passionate about doing good and showing up for people in dire need thousands of miles from home. On 1 April 2024, Jim, along with six colleagues, was travelling in a clearly marked World Central Kitchen convoy on a road identified as accessible for humanitarian aid, transporting food to the north of the Gaza strip, close to the famine. The convoy was subject to an IDF drone attack and all seven humanitarian workers were killed.

I welcome the steps that the Government have taken to secure accountability since the attack, including pressing the Israeli ambassador for an investigation, and I know that the former Prime Minister, Middle East Minister and Foreign Secretary met with the Henderson family. I was very disappointed to hear on 19 August that Israel will not be launching a criminal investigation into the attack. The joint statement by the Governments of the UK, Australia and Canada condemning the situation as shameful was exactly the right thing to do, and I strongly believe that further action must be taken.

Rather than demonstrating remorse, the commanding officer, Colonel Mendel, has reportedly sought to justify the strikes and said that he does not regret the order that he made. The IDF has maintained that it believed

that Hamas had taken control of the WCK convoy after it allegedly deviated from an approved route. However, World Central Kitchen has strongly disputed that account, stating that the IDF was fully aware of the convoy's movements, activities and purpose. An independent investigation into the WCK killings remains essential to establish the full facts of what occurred and deliver justice for the victims and their families. Confidence in the integrity of any investigation depends on it being independent and transparent.

The family and I would like the Minister's confirmation on one point. There have been persistent rumours that there were RAF planes flying that day and that they passed intelligence on the convoy to the IDF. Will the Minister reconfirm that that was not the case?

What happened to Jim and the other brave humanitarian workers should never have happened. Aid workers play a critical role in saving lives in conflict zones and must be able to carry out their work safely and without fear of being targeted. I was pleased to hear the Minister for the Middle East agree earlier that those responsible for the deaths must be held to account. The international community must send a clear message that attacks on humanitarian personnel by the IDF cannot go without justice.

9.19 pm

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): During his statement to the House last week, the Foreign Secretary said that

"we will never have stability in the middle east without a two-state solution."—[*Official Report*, 8 September 2026; Vol. 790, c. 884.]

That line touched me, as when I was invited to go on a visit to Israel and Palestine more than a decade ago, the very same words were used to explain why that visit was so important, and why understanding the relationship between the two places and the fears and threats they both faced was so important. On my visit, way back then, I saw the withholding of water from Rawabi; settlers encroaching on the hillsides of the west bank; the way that families whose children had played together were gradually pulled in different directions as the time for national service approached; and the difference between the day-to-day lives of the people of Ramallah and the people of Tel Aviv, and the tension between the two populations. Like every schoolchild in that country, I visited Yad Vashem and learned about the horrors that came before the Holocaust—the dehumanising of Jewish people in Europe, and how antisemitism can manifest itself in the most unusual ways. What I saw will never leave me, but it did leave me convinced that a two-state solution is the only way.

Fast forward to 2023 and the horror of the atrocities inflicted on the people of Israel by Hamas. Every person who took part in the murder, torture and kidnapping of people on kibbutzim or at the music festival, or simply going about their lives, must be held to account. But although the pain of the Israeli people and the Jewish diaspora cannot be overestimated, it does not justify what followed in the following two years: the killing of 70,000 people, including 20,000 children, and the destruction of everything that is Gaza. What has happened since the official ceasefire, with the continued attacks, the violence and intimidation in the west bank and the attempt to take more land, cannot be ignored. We must not turn a blind eye as Prime Minister Netanyahu attempts to destroy Gaza.

That is why I was pleased that the UK recognised the state of Palestine, and why I am relieved that the Foreign Secretary has taken further measures to show that the UK is prepared to stand up for what most of my residents believe. However, I know that this causes nervousness in some parts of our community, and I recognise that people are worried that this suggests the UK is no longer a friend of Israel. To that, I say that when a friend is attacking their neighbour, stealing their land and hurting their children, a friend holds them to account. But we must make sure that our Jewish communities in this country and the Jewish people in Israel who do not support this are not blamed for what the Government in Israel are doing.

I know that some residents want us to go even further, and I hear their calls. For now, I believe the Government are close to getting the balance right, but we are in a fluid situation, and I hope for reassurance that if the Government in Israel continue with their actions and do not hear our calls for change, or those of countries such as Canada and France, we will keep everything on the table. Importantly, I also hope that as we head towards winter, the children in Gaza will be protected from famine and from the cold. We must not go quiet on the humanitarian front.

There is, however, one area that I struggle to reconcile, which I raise on behalf of my constituents who have been caught up with it—I am surprised I am the only person to have mentioned it in this debate—and that is proscription. I am not sure what my parliamentary privilege allows me to say, so I am going to choose my words extremely carefully, but I cannot be the only hon. Member who struggles to see masked people intimidating our towns and abusing our rescue crews being treated as activists, when elderly or silently seated people holding placards that name a group find themselves not only arrested, but treated as terrorists. I should stress that I absolutely condemn the breaking and entering of property, criminal damage and all other offences, but they are already crimes. I also know that protesters who insist on naming a proscribed group probably know the consequences, and that among those decent people hide cowards, racists and people who are just there for the thrill.

As we move forward in our position, though, I wonder whether we should ask if this is still proportionate, particularly as some companies are starting to take action against people who are wearing badges for Palestine. They do not worry about the badge for Ukraine that I am wearing. I do not make apologies for those who break the law, but I do ask the Government to reflect—and I am using my words carefully here. Given that they have now recognised the state of Palestine and have taken action in support of Palestine, maybe it is time to review the proscription of the group wearing those exact same words, but in a different order.

9.24 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), I believe that historical context is essential when it comes to this debate, because Britain has been an important participant in creating the situation that Palestine and Israel are in. Our country's role as the former colonial power in Palestine—issuing and implementing the Balfour declaration of 1917 and presiding over the dispossession and disenfranchisement of the Palestinian

[Brian Leishman]

people—is an awful stain that has got deeper with the failure to stand up for the inalienable rights of Palestinians in the decades after the Balfour declaration.

Britain was an architect in establishing Israel, but over time the relationship has changed. Britain and Israel have become a partnership largely defined by imperialism, colonialism and capitalism, and the oppression, apartheid and poverty that those traits have created. Co-operation between the British and Israeli Governments goes beyond the “normal” relations that most nations have. It was a year ago that the then Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer, welcomed the Israeli President, Isaac Herzog, to No. 10 Downing Street. The House should remember that President Herzog is the man who said that an entire nation was responsible for the October attacks perpetrated by Hamas, and that the collective punishment of Palestinians was right.

President Herzog came to protest against British positions, including the potential—at the time—recognition of a Palestinian state and Britain supporting humanitarian efforts. The result of the meeting was not a resounding condemnation of Herzog’s abhorrent views, but instead the Government stressing that Israel is a long-standing ally and the importance of our ongoing partnership with Israel. The appeasement of the president of a state that carries out a genocide is a much more recent stain on our nation.

The time for the UK to show international and moral leadership, as we did last week, was long overdue. Like many others in this place, I welcomed the change in outlook from our new Prime Minister and our Government with the Foreign Secretary’s statement. It was a real change and a massive step towards Israel being held to account for its blatant, flagrant and repeated violations of international law, but it must be just the start. Our Government must act much more quickly, because Palestinians cannot wait six to nine months. They are still subject to human rights abuses because of Israeli state-sanctioned settler violence. The UK should not be financially facilitating that a day longer.

I say to the Minister that the UK Government must target the infrastructure that funds, sustains and supports Israel’s unlawful occupation and impose measures on key entities, including Israeli Government Ministries that are implicated in establishing, maintaining and providing material support to illegal settlements and settlement infrastructure. The UK Government must end any political, diplomatic, financial and military support that contributes to Israel’s serious and systematic violations of international law. The Government should suspend the UK-Israel trade and partnership agreement and impose targeted sanctions, including travel bans and asset freezes, against Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel Katz, Orit Strook and all Israeli officials directly implicated in ethnic cleansing and the forcible transfer of Palestinians in the west bank.

There is no doubt in my mind that we have witnessed a genocide take place, so the UK must now act swiftly in response by ending all political, diplomatic, financial and military support that contributes to Israel’s ongoing genocide in Gaza. The UK must sanction the Israeli officials most implicated in the commission of genocide and commit to executing ICC arrest warrants. Finally,

the UK must support South Africa’s genocide case against Israel in the ICJ, just as the UK has done in support of *The Gambia v. Myanmar* case.

To finish, I wish to reiterate that our Government have done the right thing in shifting our position, but we must go further and quicker if we are to repay the historical debt that we owe the Palestinian people.

9.29 pm

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): Because you have called me last, Madam Deputy Speaker, I owe my hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) a pint, so thanks very much! You were not to know, of course.

Last week, the Foreign Secretary firmly committed the UK Government to supporting the call for accountability for what has happened in Gaza and the west bank. It is on that matter that I wish to reflect, because last month an Israeli prosecutor announced that he would not pursue criminal proceedings for the murder of my constituent John Chapman, an aid worker from Poole who was killed by the IDF in April 2024 while working with World Central Kitchen, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham). The officer responsible for the strikes claimed that the workers were identified as targets after a brief encounter with armed guards presumed to be from Hamas. That has been found to be a baseless accusation. The IDF, operating a policy of “guilt by association”, then attacked the aid convoy. The IDF conceded that the murder of the aid workers had been the result of an

“erroneous assessment that Hamas military operatives were present in the vehicles”,

but concluded that that did not give rise to a reasonable suspicion that a criminal offence had been committed.

The IDF is getting away with the murder of John and his six colleagues, including two other British citizens. It is an absolute disgrace. The Minister said in his opening remarks that it would be for the courts to decide on this, but I think that the IDF has got an effective “get out of jail free” card. The world that we leave to our children is not set in stone; it is one that our Government and their allies help to shape. It is shaped by every action and every failure to act set the boundaries of acceptability—what is tolerated and what is condemned. These choices mould norms, establish red lines, and decide whether the world becomes safer or more dangerous. The Foreign Secretary’s step last week was one such choice—it takes us closer to upholding human rights and democracy—but the killing of John and his colleagues cannot go without accountability, and I would welcome information from the Government about the steps that they will take to secure justice for him and his family. That is the very least that they deserve, because if international law is to be meaningful, justice must prevail and someone must be held responsible.

The Government must set out a pathway to a comprehensive arms embargo with the state of Israel, because it is clear that these weapons are being used to commit war crimes. They are turned on aid workers such as my constituent, including British citizens, and they are used recklessly without any accountability. Challenging this is how we become a world leader for peace, and I urge the Government to go further, faster, to achieve that.

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

9.33 pm

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

We have had a good debate, and I want to single out a number of contributions to it. I apologise to those who have not made the list, but I am slightly time-constrained. The hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) called on the Government to go further and include F-35s in the sanctions programme. The hon. Member for Melksham and Devizes (Brian Mathew) gave us his personal experience as a kibbutznik; he has seen peaceful co-existence, and that should give us some hope. The hon. Member for Wirral West (Matthew Patrick) made an extremely powerful and well-informed speech. He created balance in our debate, and I applaud his moral courage in doing so. The hon. Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) rightly reminded us of the unspeakable actions of Hamas on 7 October, and expressed what I believe is a view held widely across the House on settlers and settler violence.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) again brought personal experience to our debate, including of visiting Gaza. The hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) spoke of the extraordinary danger faced by journalists and aid workers trying to do their work in Gaza. The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) ranged widely in his speech, and I was pleased to hear him refer to the unacceptability and absence of religious hate speech on the many marches he has attended.

The hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Dr Prinsley)—quite rightly, in my view—put his contribution in the context of the elections in Israel. The hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) brought a healthy dose of reality and realism to our proceedings. The hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Dr Chowns), while welcoming the Government's recent moves, called on them to go further and faster, as did many Members from across the House. Finally, the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) chose her words incredibly carefully when she described the Government's approach as being "close to getting the balance right".

Naturally, this conflict holds interest for many people, both inside this House and outside. We cannot forget the harm that both British Jews and Muslims have suffered because of this conflict, and no conflict in another part of the world should be allowed to feed hatred at home. The Conservative party believes that settlements are not helpful to the aim of long-term peace. We urge Israel not to take steps that could make a two-state solution more difficult, and to use its legal system to clamp down on settler violence.

I believe that, across the House, there is general consensus that there should be a two-state solution that guarantees security and stability for both the Israeli and the Palestinian people. However, His Majesty's Opposition believe that, in banning goods from Israeli settlements, the Government are enacting a policy that they know will not work. Just 13 weeks ago, two Ministers—the right hon. Members for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), and for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant)—wrote to the

Chair of the Business and Trade Committee rejecting this very policy, because the economies of Palestine and Israel are too interconnected. The fear is that innocent Palestinians and Israelis will suffer as a result. We must avoid performative actions, and instead use what influence we have. That is why the banning of goods, which led to the closure of the British consulate, is so unhelpful.

Foreign policy cannot be detached from security policy and decisions. Israel is one of our most important intelligence partners, and co-operation has helped protect British citizens from terrorist attack and hostile activity over many years. Indeed, we continue to share security concerns about Iranian activity and regional instability, making intelligence co-operation strategically important. While we welcome the Israeli intelligence services giving us assurances that that information sharing will continue, the fact that this was put into question in the first place is troubling.

To finish, I have a number of questions for the Minister. It was revealed last week that the Prime Minister had not yet spoken to Prime Minister Netanyahu since taking office. If we are not even talking to the Israelis at the most senior level, how are we supposed to influence Israeli policy in the west bank? The Government cannot simultaneously say that they want to influence Israel and then weaken the channels through which they can do so. Can the Minister explain how a ban on trade with settlements would be implemented in practice, and whether the Government have assessed claims that such a move could amount to a de facto boycott of Israel? There is no way to stop the British flow of goods into settlements without banning trade with Israel more broadly. Is that under consideration? Finally, 25% of pharmaceuticals used in the UK are reportedly made in Israel. Has the Foreign Secretary braced himself for potential retaliation, and what message does he give the British people who are worried about delays to essential medications?

If we go by the track record of the House, this will, quite rightly, not be the last time we debate Israel and Palestine. My only hope is that when we next do, we take a similar tone to the one we took tonight.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Members who made a speech should make the effort to return to the Chamber to hear the shadow Minister and the Minister speak, so no doubt they will be rushing in. I believe it is the Minister's debut at the Dispatch Box—I wish her well.

9.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Uma Kumaran): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I thank right hon. and hon. Members from across the House for their heartfelt contributions to today's debate, and I pay tribute to those who called, cross-party, for the actions this Labour Government have taken. I thank the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding), my hon. Friends the Members for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger), for Rugby (John Slinger), for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) and for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald), the hon. Member for Melksham and Devizes (Brian Mathew), my hon. Friends the Members for Wirral West (Matthew Patrick) and for

[Uma Kumaran]

High Peak (Jon Pearce), the hon. Members for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers), who also mentioned the work of the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) and for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss), the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), for Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley (Tahir Ali), for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) and for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Dr Prinsley), the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord), my hon. Friends the Members for Stroud (Dr Opher) and for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Dr Chowns), my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham), the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade), my hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp).

I pay tribute to the Foreign Secretary for a deeply moving and powerful speech last week, and for taking action. The Foreign Secretary's speech resonated with so many across the country. He spoke about the history of his family, and the power of his words and actions were felt by my constituents in Stratford and Bow. On a personal level, I felt profoundly the weight of his remarks, and of the action taken by the United Kingdom. As you mentioned, Madam Deputy Speaker, these are my first remarks from the Dispatch Box, so I hope you will allow me to reflect briefly on the poignance of this moment. The Foreign Secretary spoke of the sanctuary that his family were given. My parents, like so many, were given sanctuary in Britain, which is why I was born in east London. In one generation, my family has gone from being Tamil refugees who fled persecution and war, to their daughter standing here as a Minister in the Foreign Office. That is a testament to the United Kingdom.

As my hon. Friend the Minister with responsibility for the middle east said at the start of this debate, the United Kingdom is a country that stands up for the rule of law, freedom and self-determination, but as the Foreign Secretary powerfully said last week, many of us feel a deep sense of shame about what has unfolded in Palestine under the eyes of the international community. We also condemn the atrocities of 7 October and the murderous actions of the vile Hamas terrorist group.

In the debate, Members rightly welcomed the Government's standing up for what is right more strongly, and being bolder in the action we have taken. The situation in Palestine is a moral emergency. What the Israeli Government have inflicted on the people of Gaza is a stain on the conscience of the world. The occupation is unlawful. There is increasing evidence that war crimes appear to have been committed. We are witnessing unprecedented violence, including settler terrorism and ethnic cleansing in areas of the west bank. It is for those reasons that the British Government have been bolder in the actions we have taken.

I have listened carefully to the concerns that have been raised, and I will try to respond to some of the key points. At the outset, let me address the meaningful

remarks by my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West on the importance of MPs not amplifying division, but promoting understanding. Many Members focused on timing and how sanctions will work, and on concerns about rising antisemitism, arms sales and E1 expansion, so I will take those issues in turn.

On timing, there is an urgent need to respond to the deteriorating reality in Palestine. We have seen a sharp rise in settler violence, accelerating settlement expansion and a persistent failure to hold those responsible for violence to account. These recent developments threaten the viability of prospects for lasting peace, security and prosperity for Israelis and Palestinians. Our immediate priority in our designations will be to prevent settlement expansion, including in E1. We have not done this alone. We are acting alongside France and Canada, and are joining the Netherlands, Ireland, Belgium, Spain and Norway, which have all either banned goods or are in the process of doing so. Many other countries—Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Poland, Portugal and Sweden—have pledged their support for further action.

On implementation and whether matters can be expedited, implementation will take six to nine months. That is a reasonable and necessary timeframe. We are working intensively on implementation. Sanctions are powerful and technical. We must take the time necessary to ensure that the measures are effective and enforceable.

On the legislative changes that may be needed, we are acting as swiftly as we can. We are also taking more immediate steps. As the Foreign Secretary announced last week, we have sanctioned a further group of extremist settlers who have supported or incited violence against Palestinian communities. We have expanded the global human rights sanctions regime, enabling swifter action against those involved in violations of international humanitarian law, whether in Gaza or anywhere else in the world. At the UN General Assembly in New York later this month, we will shine a harsh spotlight on what is happening and what must change.

On genocide and arms export licences, the UK has always supported full, robust and fair judicial processes to consider allegations, with final determinations made by competent courts before the British Government reach a conclusion. It is right that the issue has been brought before the ICJ, and I make clear that we support the court in coming to its determination.

Andy McDonald: The Minister is setting out the criteria around the crime of genocide, but would she accept that the duty actually bites when the risk of genocide is known, not at the determination of legal processes? That is when the United Kingdom has a duty to act. I welcome the steps that have been taken thus far.

Uma Kumaran: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, and as I have said, final determinations will be made by competent courts before the British Government reach a conclusion.

Mr Adnan Hussain: Will the Minister give way?

Uma Kumaran: No, I will carry on. The measures are not a ban on travel, tourism or visits to religious sites. British citizens will continue to be able to visit Jerusalem and religious sites in line with FCDO travel advice. The measures are not a ban on religious expression.

The measures focus on settlement-related economic activity, not on people because they are Israeli, Jewish or any particular nationality or faith. We continue to oppose the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign, and will provide appropriate exemptions and continue to listen to the British Jewish community and its concerns.

I will address the arms sales question, which came up multiple times. Britain has already suspended or refused over 80 export licences used by the IDF in Gaza. The hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) asked how the sanctions will work and how they will be lifted. Through our new regime, we will ban the import of goods from illegal Israeli settlements and create new powers to act against individuals and companies that support, facilitate or profit from illegal settlement activity. On when the sanctions will or will not be lifted, we will continue to address and assess the actions of any Israeli Government in the future, whether in Gaza or the west bank, and the ban on such exports will remain in place for as long as the occupation persists, as will the ban on the advertising and promotion of land and property in illegal settlements.

We are working intensively on the measures. Sanctions are a powerful and technical tool, and it is important that we design them carefully so that they have the impact we intend. The measures are designed specifically to target activity linked to illegal settlements—particularly that which underpins the expansion of settlements—while protecting legitimate trade between the UK and green-line Israel.

The enforcement of sanctions is a priority for Government. The Office of Trade Sanctions Implementation, HMRC and the National Crime Agency all have important roles in enforcement and implementation. We will work closely across Government to ensure, in practical terms, that settlement postcodes will be identified and appropriate checks will be put in place to verify compliance. When breaches occur, the Government have a range of civil and criminal powers available, ranging from civil penalties to, in the most serious cases, prosecution, including powers to confiscate assets found to be the proceeds of crime. Detailed guidance will be published alongside any future legislation. Let me be clear: companies that do not take sanctions compliance seriously will face real and full consequences.

Members have rightly raised concerns about rising antisemitism. Those are concerns that we take seriously. Antisemitism is a scourge and an evil. We must call it out at every turn. In east London, where I represent, we are proud to have Jewish and Muslim communities living side by side, and long may that continue.

The measures announced are a response to the deteriorating reality in Palestine. We have seen rising settler terrorism, accelerating settlement expansion and a persistent failure to hold those responsible for violence to account. The Government must be able to disagree with the policies of the Israeli Government, uphold international law and act in relation to illegal settlements. I reiterate what the Foreign Secretary and the Minister for the Middle East have said: holding British Jews responsible for the actions of the Israeli Government is antisemitism, plain and simple.

On humanitarian support, Members have rightly raised the appalling suffering that children are enduring in Gaza. Last year, a cross-Government taskforce supported 50 critically ill and injured children, together with their immediate families, to leave Gaza and receive specialist

treatment in NHS hospitals across the UK. As confirmed in a written ministerial statement in June, the UK will resume this support this year for those identified as needing urgent medical care, giving children access to specialist treatment that is not currently available locally. We recognise that many of these children and their families have experienced lasting and profound trauma.

The hon. Member for Esher and Walton raised that point and humanitarian aid matters, as well as questions on our aid budget. The Minister for the Middle East has met with the World Food Programme, and has today reaffirmed this Labour Government's manifesto commitment of 0.7% of GDP when fiscal circumstances allow. The safety and wellbeing of the children in Gaza remains our highest priority. The United Kingdom remains committed to supporting humanitarian assistance to Gaza, where basic needs remain unmet. We continue to prioritise health, nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene programmes. This financial year, we are providing £23.3 million to UNRWA, supporting healthcare, education, social services, emergency food assistance and shelter.

My hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow West and for Dulwich and West Norwood raised deep concerns on the support of children and students. In May, we announced a new partnership to deliver rehabilitation and prosthetic limbs for children with blast injuries. We also continue to support UK-Med field hospitals in Gaza.

My hon. Friends the Members for Truro and Falmouth and for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) mentioned World Central Kitchen. This matter is deeply concerning, and I pay tribute to their constituents who were killed. The Foreign Secretary has committed to meeting them, and I thank them for continuing to be powerful advocates here. The Government pay tribute to James Kirby, James Henderson and John Chapman, and our thoughts remain with their families. For more than two years, we have pressed Israel to deliver the justice and accountability that the families deserve. We have raised this with the Israeli authorities and will continue to push for answers. However, I want to reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth and the family of her constituents that the rumours they have heard are simply not true.

In addition, we are providing a further £1 million for mine action in Gaza this year, on top of £4 million last year. Alongside that support, we will continue to work with a growing alliance of countries led by Arab partners in the region to advance the 20-point peace plan and support practical efforts to secure a lasting peace.

Last year, we supported more than 100 students to exit Gaza and take up their places at top UK universities. That support is continuing, with the first group of students arriving at the end of August, and more planned over the coming weeks and months.

Turning briefly to wider regional security, we recognise that events in Palestine are not happening in isolation. Iran barbarically slaughters its own civilians and continues both to threaten Israel and Jewish communities around the world and to threaten and endanger people across the middle east and here in the United Kingdom. Those consequences are felt far beyond the region, including here at home, through pressure on energy prices, food security and household budgets.

We have already designated Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and, as the Foreign Secretary has made clear, we will continue to target Iran's proxy groups.

[Uma Kumaran]

Iran must never be allowed to acquire a nuclear weapon. That is why, alongside our allies, we are reporting Iran to the UN Security Council for its nuclear violations. We are also reimposing major economic sanctions on Iran in line with the European Union and United States.

The United Kingdom strongly condemns the Houthi decision to resume conflict in Yemen and in Saudi Arabia. We offer our condolences to those injured and affected, and stand with Saudi Arabia and the internationally recognised Government of Yemen and regional partners.

Let me close by thanking Members for a thoughtful and considered debate, as mentioned by the shadow Minister.

Mr Adnan Hussain: Will the Minister give way?

Uma Kumaran: I will make progress, as you have already given me the look, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Let me close by reiterating that the two-state solution—freedom, security and self-determination for both the Palestinian and Israeli people—is the guiding principle of this Government’s policy. This is why we are taking action. We refuse to be bystanders to further suffering and to the destruction of the two-state solution. This Government are not silent in the face of deep injustice, nor are we powerless. The only route to security for both peoples is a safe and secure Israel and a safe and secure Palestine, living side by side in peaceful coexistence.

I have seen that co-operation is possible. I visited the west bank and Jerusalem last year, when I was a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee. It was a young Israeli NGO worker who bravely led me to her friend, a Palestinian grandfather—his house had been demolished, and her security was at risk for the very fact that she had led us to him. But together, they spoke of their dreams for peace for both the Israeli and Palestinian people. It is that hope for peace and hope of the two-state solution that we must keep alive.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Israel and Palestine.

Business without Debate

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE DRAFT CONVERSION PRACTICES BILL

Ordered,

That Feryal Clark be discharged from the Joint Committee on the draft Conversion Practices Bill and Naz Shah be added.—(Michael Wheeler.)

PETITIONS

Safe Reopening of Mount Batten Beach and Peninsula

9.55 pm

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): Along with almost 1,700 signatures from a similar online petition, I present this petition of residents from across Plymouth, Plymstock and the rest of my South West Devon constituency about the ongoing closure of Mount Batten beach and peninsula.

This important city beach, accessible by public transport and used by thousands, has been closed since 10 July 2026, when significantly high levels of asbestos fibres were discovered in the sand. Fencing has been erected around the entire area. Since then, over 140 local residents have attended a meeting to raise their concerns about what this closure means for the local community, including businesses located at the beach, and campaigners have continued speaking out about the need to find a way to reopen the beach.

The petition calls on Plymouth City council and the Government to do all they can to ensure that measures be taken to see the beach safely reopened and safeguarded for future generations. The fight continues.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of South West Devon and the surrounding area,

Declares that the continued closure of Mount Batten Beach peninsula is having a significant impact on local residents, sea swimmers, watersports users, businesses and the wider community; further declares that residents want to see the site reopened safely as soon as possible; further notes that specialist expertise is required to identify the source of the asbestos contamination and determine the steps needed to enable the safe reopening of the site.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government and Plymouth City Council to do whatever it takes to secure the necessary specialist expertise as soon as possible, provide the community with clear answers on the next steps, and work at pace towards the safe reopening of Mount Batten Beach and peninsula.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003237]

Bearwood and Merley Green Belt

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): The balance between nature and green space and the need for housing is a delicate one, and it is always really sad when people who wish to maintain open spaces between villages are described as nimbys when they are simply trying to maintain good mental health for their communities.

The green belt was created to ensure protected open land of high quality between communities, and it serves a purpose, so it is deeply concerning to see new legislation erode that purpose and local decision making on sites coming forward when there is no relevant local plan. This has led to residents in Mid Dorset and North Poole to ask me to present their petition, signed by over 900 local people, to request that the House of Commons urge the Government to uphold the purpose of green belt and demonstrate this by calling in and rejecting the planning application for 1,200 homes on green belt between Merley and Bearwood.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Mid Dorset and North Poole,

Declares that the Green Belt land between Bearwood and Merley is a precious, high-quality green space providing a natural buffer between the two communities; further declares this land that supports local wildlife and gives residents access to valuable open space; further declares that the Government’s plan to build 1,200 homes on this

land as part of the proposed Canford Garden Village development would undermine the purposes of Green Belt set out by the National Planning Policy Framework, namely to prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another and to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment; further declares that the people of Mid Dorset and North Poole are concerned about the erosion of local decision making in the planning process, and want their voices to be heard in the context of this planned housing development.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to uphold the key purposes of Green Belt set out in the National Planning Policy Framework by calling in and rejecting the planning application for 1,200 homes to be built on the Green Belt land between Bearwood and Merley.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003238]

Proposed Leicester City Council Boundary Expansion

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): In the Government's own consultation about the expansion of Leicester, nine out of 10 people said that they were against it. Now, with millions of pounds of taxpayers' money wasted so far, Ministers are having to do a complete reworking of this whole chaotic, undemocratic process, amid accusations of gerrymandering. Despite this, the Mayor of Leicester and the Government want to press on regardless. Local people do not want this, so I present this petition, which is part of a county-wide petition that has gained 40,000 signatures. I would like to thank everyone who signed it. We are making progress.

The petition states:

"The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to halt and reconsider any proposals for the expansion of Leicester City Council's boundaries, and to ensure that the views of local residents are fully considered before any changes are implemented, thereby protecting the character, identity and independence of the aforementioned communities.

And the petitioners remain, etc."

And I agree.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Harborough, Oadby & Wigston,

Declares that the petitioners oppose any proposal to extend the boundaries of Leicester City Council in a manner that would incorporate the communities of Great Glen, Wistow, Newton Harcourt and Little Stretton into the City of Leicester; and further declares that these communities possess distinct identities, histories and local

governance arrangements, and that any boundary changes which remove them from their existing district and parish structures would undermine local representation and community cohesion.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to halt and reconsider any proposals for the expansion of Leicester City Council's boundaries, and to ensure that the views of local residents are fully considered before any changes are implemented, thereby protecting the character, identity and independence of the aforementioned communities.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003239]

Local Government Reorganisation in Leicestershire, Rutland and Lincolnshire

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): This petition calls on the Government to abandon their plans to force a local government reorganisation designed by the cities of Lincoln and Leicester across our rural communities in Rutland, Stamford and the Harborough and Stamford villages. In every single proposal, the Government are imposing the least popular option on our communities. That is why in the last few weeks there have been 1,326 hand-written signatures from residents, on top of 7,249 online, as part of 40,000 people across Leicestershire. Therefore, 8,573 are rejecting the Government's plans for our communities.

The 1,326 petitioners

"therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and reject the current proposals for local government reorganisation"

being imposed on us.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the petitioners oppose Government plans to break up local government across Leicestershire, Rutland and Lincolnshire by imposing the proposals of the cities of Leicester and Lincoln; further declares that residents of Rutland and the Harborough villages oppose being forced into a sprawling Leicestershire Council serving over 578,000 people; further declares that residents of Stamford and South Kesteven oppose being forced into a council serving 574,000 people stretching from Gainsborough to Stamford; and further declares that residents of the Harborough villages of Thurnby, Bushby, Scraptoft and Stoughton do not consent to being taken over by the City of Leicester.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and reject the current proposals for local government reorganisation in Leicestershire, Rutland and Lincolnshire.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003240]

Battle of Cable Street: 90th anniversary

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

10 pm

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is an honour to lead this Adjournment debate. Let me say at the start that another colleague wants to speak, and I will take two very short interventions from Members I have had conversations with before the debate.

Next month, on 4 October, thousands of people from east London will be marking the 90th anniversary of what is commonly known as the battle of Cable Street, when the Jewish community and allies stood together to march off Oswald Mosley and his blackshirts. The victory is held up today as a high water mark for so many causes, including anti-fascism, grassroots Jewish activism and cross-community solidarity. It echoes from 1936 to the present in so many ways.

Antisemitism and hate crimes are again on the rise in Britain. Just last week, a man was charged after making a Nazi salute outside a synagogue. Of course, we must never forget the victims of the recent antisemitic attacks in north London—including the stabbings in Golders Green earlier this year—and the abhorrent Heaton Park terrorist attack a year ago, which took the lives of Melvin Cravitz and Adrian Daulby. We are also seeing the return of far-right and racist agitators who seek, much like Mosely, to exploit the struggles of working-class people in this country and sow hatred, intolerance and division.

In the UK, migrants and asylum seekers are a sharp target. The anti-migrant pogroms in Belfast were just one among many chilling incidents of racist violence in recent months.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady on securing the debate. It is indeed important that we remember this occasion: 90 years ago, a fascist march was prevented from passing through Cable Street in London.

Northern Ireland has been especially afflicted by deep divisions running through our community, and the Peaceplus action plan has tried to address those issues. Does the hon. Lady agree that expanding and supporting cross-community initiatives across the UK and Northern Ireland can help strengthen relationships between communities? Remembering such events help us to do just that.

Apsana Begum: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct that communities must work with one another to deal with the challenges of our time—particularly the rise of racism and fascism, which we see across the world.

Far-right parties are winning elections across western Europe, so we must look seriously and carefully at our own history and how we overcame those challenges in the past. Fascism was not defeated in Britain in a single day, but no day contributed as much as 4 October 1936. I am pleased that the Minister, a fellow London MP, is here, along with my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney (Rushanara Ali), in whose constituency Cable Street is now situated after the boundary changes in 2024. We are here to debate the 90th anniversary and understand how the battle came to be.

By 1934, the British Union of Fascists was concentrating its efforts on building a menacing street movement in inner-city areas. In east London, the BUF had four large branches. Thousands of supporters were based in a diverse and economically struggling area, where the largest minorities were of Irish Catholic and east European Jewish heritage. About 100,000 Jews lived in east London, where shop signs were written in Yiddish and more than 100 synagogues and shtiebel were established. Fascists attempted to set Irish Catholic and Jewish communities against each other, accusing Jews of taking English jobs, smashing their market stalls and attacking and beating Jews returning from synagogue or from shopping.

On 26 September 1936, Mosley announced his intention to march provocatively right through those Jewish neighbourhoods and hold rallies with his supporters, but within two days 100,000 signatures were collected by the Jewish People's Council—a local grassroots campaign formed only that year—to petition the then Home Secretary for a ban on the march to

“retain peaceable and amicable relations between all sections of East London's population.”

Local mayors and local MPs including one of my predecessors, the great Labour MP George Lansbury, handed in the petition, yet shockingly the then Home Secretary refused and instead decided to send 7,000 police officers to protect Mosley and the blackshirts. Just hours after the refusal was issued, the Jewish People's Council began to distribute leaflets calling on citizens of London to make sure the fascist march would not take place.

Far from being a spontaneous uprising, it took an extraordinary amount of effort to organise east London's resistance. The Jewish People's Council worked frantically to mobilise Jewish and non-Jewish communities locally, while Communist party, Independent Labour party and trade union branches all mobilised the area's textile workers, dockers and railway workers.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Your Party): As one whose family members were part of that demonstration in 1936 against the march of fascism, I compliment the hon. Member on her wonderful speech. Does she acknowledge that when we commemorate the march on Sunday week in her constituency and her borough we will also be opposing the rise of the far right in this country and all across Europe? We should remember that in 1936 all of officialdom said to the people of the east end, “Shut up, do nothing about it and let them march.” The people refused to let them march—it was the biggest defeat that Mosley and the fascists ever had in Britain—and we should thank them for their bravery.

Apsana Begum: The right hon. Member is correct. The debate is about recognising those really courageous, brave efforts. He speaks of his family's contribution, as his parents were at the battle of Cable Street; over the years, I have spoken to him about his parents' stories.

By the time that the human blockade was formed, tens of thousands of protesters had gathered at Gardiner's corner at Aldgate, hugely outnumbering the 4,000 fascists and their 7,000-strong police protection. It is important to remember that younger anti-fascists—children as young as 12—acted as runners delivering messages and directing for reinforcements. Far too often overlooked is the role of women, who leafleted and organised workers in the run-up to the march and in their thousands defended barricades on the day.

To clear a path for the fascists, the police brutalised protesters with truncheons and attempted to charge their horses through their path. Hundreds of Jews and anti-fascists engaging in self-defence were seriously injured or arrested, and later accused by the police of having instigated the violence. Police were unable to force their entry via Aldgate or Whitechapel after huge confrontations there and eventually closed in on Cable Street. They broke through the first barrier at Cable Street, but fierce resistance pushed them back. By late afternoon, Mosley was instructed to retreat westwards. The police withdrew, and that evening celebrations erupted across the east end of London.

As the daughter of migrants who moved to east London, I feel it is all too important to consider how community solidarity and resistance continued in the aftermath. The BUF did not disappear overnight, but anti-fascists were able to build on the battle to form a confident and united mass movement in the east end of London. Leafleting and public campaigning took place to keep out Mosley's fascists in local elections held five months later, while initiatives such as the Stepney Tenants Defence League were pivotal in uniting the Irish and Jewish communities that Mosley had attempted to divide. Jews stood with Irish Catholics, and vice versa, against evictions and exploitation by landlords. They made it clear that their struggle was a class struggle, and this cut away at the remaining support for the BUF's antisemitic politics in east London.

For me and for anti-racists across east London and far beyond, this is an enduring inspiration. Many of those present spoke movingly about the cross-community solidarity that they saw at Cable Street that day. They included people such as Charlie Goodman. Charlie was arrested at Cable Street and after three months in prison went on to fight for the republicans in Spain. He spoke of the

"Orthodox Jews with long silk coats and soft felt hats and the sidepieces standing shoulder to shoulder with Irish Catholics, dockers and Somali seamen...they all felt there was a need to be out there to stand on that particular day."

In other words, they knew that an injury to one was an injury to all.

This, too, is how subsequent generations of east-enders have united in the face of hostile racist threats. Indeed, in the decades after Cable Street, east London's Bangladeshi community, especially its youth movements and socialist and trade unionist allies, mobilised in response to the racially motivated murder of a 25-year-old textile worker, Altab Ali, in 1978. A huge demonstration marched Altab Ali's coffin to Downing Street to demand their rights, while Bangladeshis and anti-racists together organised night patrols to protect communities from neo-Nazi threats.

In the 1990s, communities on the Isle of Dogs in my constituency came together to confront the British National party. Trade unionists, the Bangladeshi community and allies once again organised huge demonstrations and mobilised across communities to challenge the BNP's support base. Ahead of the 75th anniversary of the battle of Cable Street, the English Defence League was marched off Whitechapel, and even more recently the United Kingdom Independence party failed in its attempt to drive a crusade towards mosques last October and in its provocations again in January this year. Generation after generation of east-enders have had to confront

attempts to divide our neighbours, to target, attack and intimidate them and to spread fear in our communities. As the historian, educator and author David Rosenberg has often reminded us, the anti-fascists at the battle of Cable Street did not have a blueprint, but they left us one with their sheer courage.

As difficult as this may be for some, we must also pay attention to the catastrophically poor decisions from the police and political establishment at the time. The shameful decisions of the then Home Secretary amounted to tacit consent for the fascist assault in east London. His mounted police cracked skulls and arrested scores of protesters, some of whom received custodial sentences with hard labour for defending themselves and their communities. Six fascists were arrested, compared with 79 anti-fascists. Others, including the then Labour leadership, urged members to stay away from Cable Street that day. However, rank and file members, trade unionists and grassroots socialists all saw the necessity of defeating the blackshirts and continued to organise and mobilise.

The victory at Cable Street has been memorialised in the iconic Cable Street mural, a major piece of public art unveiled in 1983 on the wall of the former St George's town hall. It depicts a chaotic scene of mass resistance and street battles, and is itself a grassroots piece of cultural resistance with its own fascinating history. I would like to know whether the Government will be working to protect that cultural heritage, particularly as it has, sadly, been vandalised numerous times. I know that, unlike in 1936, the Government have invested resources into building community cohesion and inter-faith activities in my borough of Tower Hamlets, and I am pleased that my local council, along with local voluntary organisations, have been awarded Common Ground resilience funds to build social connections across communities, complementing numerous initiatives from the Mayor of London.

Next month, on 4 October, east London will be standing together. Trade unionists, Jews, Muslims, Bangladeshis, Somalis, socialists and many thousands more will be at Cable Street once again to mark the history, legacy and values of all those brave people who stood together 90 years ago to say, "No pasarán! They shall not pass!" Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to them and to the organising committee, including the Jewish Socialists' Group, who have done so much to immortalise the legacy of Cable Street, and tell us how the Government will honour the legacy of Cable Street and the anti-fascists of the day as we confront the rising antisemitism, racism and division of today? As my friend Rabbi Herschel Gluck OBE said:

"Cable Street isn't just a place on the map. It's a concept. It's an idea. The message of Cable Street is that we must never let evil pass."

10.15 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Stepney) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) on securing this important Adjournment debate. She represented Cable Street until the last general election, and I am very proud to represent it now. She and I have much in common. We are the beneficiaries of all those who came before us, who fought in the battle of Cable Street to make the east end the place it went on to become, and the generations after,

[*Rushanara Ali*]

who fought against the racism of the National Front—some of our colleagues who are in this Chamber and in this House, who made the east end a safe place for us to grow up in.

My hon. Friend and I studied at the same secondary school and, as children and young people, along with our peers, benefited from learning about the battle of Cable Street and by visiting the memorial that she spoke about, which has inspired young people in the generations that came after as well as before us, and it continues to do so.

The significance of what happened almost 90 years ago, as we look to the 90th anniversary, which we will mark on 4 October, remains crucial for our society if we are to fight the modern-day intolerance, hostility and hatred that we are seeing yet again, in even greater force, fuelled by the disinformation and online hatred that is playing out in our society and in our communities up and down the country.

Growing up, I heard the testimonies of so many in our community. I am a few years older than my hon. Friend, so I was able to meet many powerful advocates of the anti-racism movement, including two of my former constituents who are no longer with us. I pay tribute to their struggles and what they did. They were young people when they took part in the battle of Cable Street: the late, great Max Levitas, whom I had the good fortune of being able to campaign with as a Member of Parliament, who fought against the English Defence League and other far-right groups that sought to exploit division and stir up hatred in my constituency when I was first elected; and the late Beatty Orwell, who died in 2023 aged 105, who also took part in the battle of Cable Street. They were two people who inspired me and supported me through my political career, along with many others in our community who told the story of the anti-racism movement and continued to work across communities.

My hon. Friend spoke eloquently about that period and what happened afterwards. The fight against intolerance and hatred continues. We have to build on the legacy of that generation, who worked so hard to ensure that division is not amplified by those who seek to divide us. I hope that as we mark the 90th anniversary of the battle of Cable Street, we can all work together to redouble our efforts to build strong communities, cohesion and strong inter-faith relations, as well as relations with those with no faith, and recognise that the modern-day challenge of intolerance and hatred is even greater in some respects, though much has been achieved. We have to be vigilant and we have to work together to ensure that we stand against racism, fascism and intolerance of the kind that we are seeing grow once again. I look to the Minister to work with us to do that.

10.19 pm

The Minister for Homelessness, Democracy, Communities and Faith (Florence Eshalomi): I congratulate my fellow London MP and hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) on securing this timely debate. She referred to a number of issues that sadly are still happening on our streets. She also referred to the tragic death of 25-year-old Altab Ali in 1978. I remember

when I first learned about the history of that park and the fact that it was renamed in 1998 following his death in 1978. When people go to Whitechapel and see that arch, the history and significance of that is powerful. My hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney (Rushanara Ali) highlighted their shared connection in that proud part of the east end.

The battle of Cable Street was a defining moment in the history of the city that I and my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse proudly represent. When Londoners blocked Mosley's antisemites from marching, they showed the world that hatred and intolerance have no place on these streets. London, both then and now, is built on solidarity across our differences. I am proud that we are a hugely diverse city—it is a key component of our success. We are bonded by being Londoners. We look out for each other in London. This is the point that the fascists back then could not comprehend, and it is exactly what far-right extremists today fail to understand.

The 4 October 1936 was not just a significant moment in London's history; it was pivotal in the history of British Jews. It was Jewish communities that Mosley was targeting, and it was Jewish communities who led the response and built the barricades against the fascists, made with anything they could find from nearby streets and builders' yards. In the many years since, the Jewish community has been at the heart of London's culture, identity and great achievements. Yet, 90 years on, Jewish people continue to face the same ugly brutality and racism here in our city.

I can testify to that first hand. As an MP working directly with many different communities, I was deeply disturbed to be confronted by the casual, day-to-day antisemitism on our streets. We remember with deep sadness the victims of Heaton Park—I attended a memorial with the Secretary of State on the bank holiday on 31 August, meeting the families of the two people who were tragically killed—and the stabbing of two Jewish men in Golders Green. But we must do much more than remember; we must confront this hate where it persists in educational settings, workplaces, public services and beyond.

Today we are here to celebrate the resistance of 1936, but we must also draw lessons from it in how we confront the hatred we see today. In the aftermath, as my hon. Friend mentioned, Ministers introduced a ban on marching in uniforms and required demonstrations to notify the police of their intentions. These principles remain important today. The Government have demonstrated through action their unwavering commitment to tackling antisemitism. We must also be alert to how Mosley's political violence was financed by far-right extremists abroad and raise our defences again today. But the most important lesson from Cable Street is that it was the local community that stood up against hate and division.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Is the anniversary not also an opportunity for us to pay tribute to the trade union movement and the countless working people who stood against racism, fascism and hatred? It is in the spirit of the trade union movement's best traditions: collective responsibility, solidarity, and fighting prejudice and discrimination, wherever it occurs.

Florence Eshalomi: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the importance of that solidarity, which our hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse also highlighted.

It was local residents from many different backgrounds, including trade unionists, east-enders and those from migrant communities, who told the vocal minority, “Your hate does not represent us.”

Today, our Jewish friends and neighbours, in the face of antisemitism, need us all to stand with them again. This Government have taken a firm stance against antisemitism and are tackling it across businesses, civil society, health, education, culture and policing. That commitment is backed by action, including £32.4 million for Jewish community protective security, alongside a wider £251.1 million policing package over the next three years, a £1 million expansion of the Common Ground programme for communities facing antisemitism, and up to £7 million to tackle antisemitism in schools, colleges and universities.

In 1936 the fascists wanted to march through the east end because its boroughs were predominantly Jewish. Today it is also home to Muslims, and for that reason the far right today often try to whip up their hate through so-called demonstrations through the east end. They will not succeed, be it in Whitechapel or elsewhere in the country, for the same reason that they failed back then: London and Britain are home to good, decent people—people who are proud to be British across ethnicities and religions.

We are addressing the root cause of division through investment in cohesion and inter-faith initiatives. As we set out in our social cohesion action plan, “Protecting What Matters”, we are providing a further £800 million to bring communities together to decide where investment is spent in our neighbourhoods. Overall, our Pride in

Place programme is providing up to £5.8 billion over 10 years to support 284 places. This will serve as a cornerstone of this Government’s support for communities.

We are also supporting inter-faith work, continuing to bring forward programmes such as Near Neighbours, which brings people together in religiously and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods, and growing Inter Faith Week to strengthen understanding and interaction between people of different faiths.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that peace walks, such as the one I attended yesterday in Rugby, where members of the community, members of different faith groups and people of no faith, walked between different religious establishments, are an important part of that inter-faith work, showing that ordinary people want to come together, irrespective of their background, faith or ethnic background, and unite as one community against those who would divide us?

Florence Eshalomi: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that. Many community initiatives, including many peace walks, some of which I have attended in my constituency, are so vital where people can come together—as my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) mentioned, local people, real people and trade unionists all coming together to show that solidarity.

We are taking wider steps to boost faith and belief literacy. But none of this can substitute for a very clear position that antisemitism, far-right extremists and political violence have no place in Britain. So I say to the blackshirts then and to the thugs now, we continue to say, “No pasarán! They shall not pass!”

Question put and agreed to.

10.28 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 14 September 2026

[PAULA BARKER *in the Chair*]

Water Sector: Public Ownership

4.30 pm

Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 762640 relating to a referendum on public ownership of the water sector.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Barker. I begin by thanking Ashley Paul Smith, who is sitting in the Public Gallery, for pulling together this petition. It has now received 208,000 signatures, and counting—I am sure that that number is already out of date. As the founder and chair of Windrush Against Sewage Pollution, Ash has been investigating the sewage scandal since 2016. Members will likely be aware that his efforts were dramatised earlier this year in Channel 4's "Dirty Business", which exposed the long-term impact of the private model on our water sector.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): That brilliant documentary was based on an example relating to South West Water and Devon. Many people in my area would like South West Water to become a company for the public benefit and mutualised. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that would be a good model for South West Water?

Paul Davies: As I run through my speech, the hon. Gentleman will find a theme of strong support for public ownership of the water sector throughout. We absolutely must look at that option.

Ash's petition calls for

"a binding national referendum on whether the water industry should be returned to public ownership...A referendum would give the public back its voice about its water."

For too long, our water sector has been in the hands of shareholders rather than the public, who pay for and rely on its delivery.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab) *rose—*

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab) *rose—*

Paul Davies: Go on.

Lizzi Collinge: My constituents in Morecambe and Lunesdale are really cross about the level of their water bills, and they get more cross when they see the profits being taken out of the water industry. Does my hon. Friend agree that that anger is fair and justified, and that some change needs to come?

Paul Davies: I absolutely agree that there is huge frustration out there, which I will refer to later in my speech. I give way to my other hon. Friend.

Fleur Anderson: My constituents in Putney are angry about Thames Water. They can see that they are paying more but getting less because of the model that we have. Does my hon. Friend agree that Thames Water needs to go into special administration and that all our water companies need to be nationalised?

Paul Davies: I will certainly come to that subject later in my speech. My view is absolutely that there needs to be fundamental change in how we ensure that people have access to affordable, safe and secure water supplies.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Paul Davies: I will make a little progress; otherwise, I am not going to get past the next few paragraphs.

In 1989, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher sold off our then publicly owned water and sewerage industry for £5.2 billion, arguing that privatisation would bring desperately needed investment to the sector. She told the Commons that she believed it would be a better deal than nationalised water. She hoped it would "proceed successfully", encouraging the Opposition at the time to "wait and see in the light of the facts rather than pontificate."—[*Official Report*, 28 November 1989; Vol. 162, c. 577.]

Years later, here we are: we can see in the light of the facts that the private model for water has been far from a success. It has been an economic, environmental and public health failure. I will take an intervention now.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): My constituents in Manchester Rusholme have seen a £57 increase this year, yet it is safe to say that there has been very little to show for it. Just last week, United Utilities had to pay a further £900,000 in fines for dumping raw sewage. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must treat water reform as a strategic priority to tackle the cost of living crisis as well as the crisis in our waterways?

Paul Davies: The short answer is yes—I absolutely agree.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Paul Davies: I will make some progress, and then I will.

The current model is absolutely an economic failure. Private companies have paid out, in 2024 prices, around £83 billion—an average of £2.4 billion a year—as dividends, while loading the companies in debt. Often, those loans were taken out simply to increase the amount of cash extracted as dividends when profits alone were not enough. As we know, crucial infrastructure has been left to fail. Not a single new reservoir has been built since 1992, and water companies have overseen the waste of around 3 billion litres of water a day through leaky pipes.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Last year, Severn Trent reported profits of £850 million, which is an increase of 45% on the previous year, yet my constituents' water bills have risen by around 10%. There have also been occasions when Severn Trent has not been as quick to carry out repairs as it could have been. Does my hon. Friend agree that the situation needs to change, so that monopoly providers do not make huge profits at the expense of hard-working families while public confidence in the sector continues to decline?

Paul Davies: I absolutely agree. As my hon. Friend will hear throughout my speech, the evidence clearly shows us that the model is failing in a range of areas. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth

[Paul Davies]

West (Jessica Toale) and the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) want to get in; I will make a little progress first, then I will give way.

The model has also been an environmental disaster. In 2024, under the administration of water companies, raw sewage was discharged into rivers and seas in England for a record 3.61 million hours. In the first six months of this year alone, raw sewage was discharged into rivers and seas during dry weather a total of 7,280 times.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Paul Davies: I will make a little progress first. According to Environment Agency data, today, just one in seven of England's waters is in good ecological condition.

Jessica Toale: I am glad that my hon. Friend raised the public health and environmental issues related to the water system. I have received representations not only about sewage at Bournemouth beach but, most recently, about exceptionally high levels of *E. coli* in Christchurch harbour, which flowed out of the Stour river in my constituency. Does my hon. Friend agree that the public interest of clear accountability in such contexts should always come before shareholder interest?

Paul Davies: I absolutely agree that transparency and accountability are crucial. As will be made clear in my speech, and, I am sure, the contributions of other Members, that is a major issue in the current model.

The model has also been a health disaster. According to Government advice, swimming in open water can increase the risk of gastrointestinal illness. Bathing water quality in England seriously lags behind that of its European counterparts. According to Best for Britain, the percentage of bathing waters in England that are rated poor quality is more than five times that in the European Union.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is well known for his courtesy, as he has just illustrated by giving way. Even more shockingly, around 80% of water companies are foreign owned—in other words, the majority of their shareholders live abroad, in all kinds of places, including China. Most users of water would be shocked to hear that. The Government have an obligation not to allow key utilities to fall into foreign hands.

Paul Davies: I absolutely agree, and under this Government work has been taking place to ensure that we have control over our vital services in the UK.

The Government are aware of the failures; their response so far has been to tighten regulation of the sector. In January, Ministers published a White Paper titled "A New Vision for Water", which was broadly in line with the recommendations made by the Independent Water Commission, also known as the Cunliffe commission. The commission was tasked with establishing key changes to improve the water sector regulatory system, including the creation of a stronger integrated water regulator that is more streamlined and more closely embedded in

the affairs of the water companies; regional planning systems; a new water ombudsman; a clearer national strategy through revamped strategic policy statements to regulators; and national targets.

Several hon. Members rose—

Gideon Amos: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous with his time. Does he agree that, as well as putting water companies into public hands, which I agree with, the companies should also be required to do more to support people to harvest their rainwater? That would reduce water bills and the amount of water being pushed into the sewers, which causes discharges into our rivers and seas.

Paul Davies: I absolutely agree with and support the hon. Gentleman's point. The issue is also about how we look after our water in the future; unfortunately, it would appear from the last few years that such innovative and sustainable initiatives would not happen under private models.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD) rose—

Paul Davies: I will bring in the hon. Gentleman later, but first I will make a bit of progress.

While the steps I mentioned signify some progress—and they are welcome—they only tinker at the edges of reform. I am concerned that the Government have failed to address the fundamental error of the past four decades: while water remains a commodity, it will never deliver an outcome in the interests of the public or the environment. It was disappointing to learn that the Government did not even permit the Independent Water Commission to consider alternative ownership models, including whether public ownership was an option. That signifies a further issue, which is the continued lack of democratic inclusion in the decisions that affect the sector.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent argument. In 2025, our regional water company, Yorkshire Water, discharged untreated sewage into our regional waters for 285,000 hours. Does he agree that that shows the failure of the private sector?

Paul Davies: I absolutely agree. As a fellow Yorkshire MP, I know only too well the issues with Yorkshire Water and their impact on citizens in our region.

Public ownership is incredibly popular among the public—Ash's petition demonstrates that, as does opinion polling. In May this year, YouGov reported that 82% of Brits believe that the water companies should be run in the public sector, compared with just 8% who believe that they should remain private. That is a marked increase from the 59% in favour in 2017. That support is not limited to Labour voters, of whom 84% are in favour: 66% of Conservative and Reform, 83% of Liberal Democrat and 87% of Green voters are also in favour.

The public overwhelmingly back the public ownership of water—in my view, with good reason. Public ownership would mean that the £22 billion earmarked for shareholder returns and interest over the next five years would go

instead towards repairing our broken water infrastructure, paying off debts and letting water company staff do their jobs properly.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for being generous with his time; many Members want to participate. I promised that I would raise this issue for my Liverpool Riverside constituents, who are complaining about United Utilities. It increased the cost of bills by 9% and then took a profit of £779 million. We are faced with crumbling Victorian systems. Does my hon. Friend agree that as a Government we need to do what we promised in our manifesto and in-source immediately?

Paul Davies: Again, as I run through my speech, my hon. Friend will see the position that I am taking on public ownership. I absolutely agree that it beggars belief to see money being siphoned off from the water sector into private hands. As has already been mentioned, many shareholders are not even in the UK while our citizens are suffering badly.

The £22 billion earmarked for shareholder returns alone would help address water poverty, which 1.8 million households faced between 2024-25. Look across the water: Paris took water back into public hands in 2010. Once that move was made, a range of social subsidies were introduced to help safeguard access to water for all. Crucially, public ownership is essential if we want to restore public trust.

Last year, the Consumer Council for Water's annual survey found that trust in the water sector had hit an all-time low. The high cost of bills, repeated violations of environmental standards and continued enrichment of company bosses has left the public disillusioned.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): On that breach of public trust, my Mid Sussex constituents tell me they do not trust South East Water because it does not take part in planning consultations and does not say if it can supply the water that new housing will inevitably require. Does the hon. Member agree that water companies must contribute to planning consultations for the new housing that is needed?

Paul Davies: I absolutely agree. As a former councillor, I have sat on many planning committees and in many instances I was extremely frustrated by the lack of engagement or, where there was engagement, by it not being up to the standard needed. I believe the move into public ownership would help us resolve that.

Regulation alone cannot fix the crisis of confidence and, as we all know, the Government's ban on bonuses for water companies that fail to meet high standards has been widely bypassed, with reports indicating that bosses' total pay actually increased in the past year. Even when under an intense spotlight from academics and campaigners such as Ash, the industry is willing to blatantly outwit regulation. To rebuild trust, the public must know for certain that their bills are being used to fund services, not profits.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Cocklemoor in Langport is a popular spot for water sports on the River Parrett and it sits right at the heart of the community. I am campaigning for it to be designated

as a bathing water site, but in 2025 alone, it was polluted more than 200 times as a direct result of Wessex Water prioritising profits over investment in stopping discharges. Does the hon. Member agree that tackling sewage dumping at official bathing water sites should be prioritised over paying big bonuses to water company bosses?

Paul Davies: I absolutely agree. I am old enough to remember when raw sewage was pumped into the coastal waters where I was born in south Wales. We started to change that and it changed quite dramatically. We seem to have regressed badly and we have seen a complete failure by the private sector to control that problem.

People must be able to see that their concerns are being listened to and that they have a meaningful say in how the industry operates. That brings me to the purpose of Ash's petition.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Paul Davies: I am going to make a little bit of progress. Ash calls for a referendum because, in his words,

"I think people are sick of being told they can't have healthy rivers and seas, just because powerful financiers want to keep making money from our water bills. Our government is listening to them but not to us, so this is how we stop being victims and start fighting back."

I appreciate where Ash is coming from—*[Interruption.]* I will make a little progress; I am conscious of time.

Despite its popularity and the strength of the case behind it, there has been a total failure from successive Governments to consider the merits of public ownership. I believe we have a strong opportunity to rectify that. It is no secret that our politics has undergone significant change in recent months. We now have a Prime Minister, Andy Burnham, who proudly states a commitment to delivering "stronger public control" of essential services. In his first statement delivered to the Commons as Prime Minister, he criticised the political path of the past 40 years, which had taken control away from communities, and cited the water sector

"as a leaking monument to that approach—a country run in the private rather than public interest."—*[Official Report, 1 September 2026; Vol. 790, c. 27.]*

I commend the Prime Minister for those words, but words must become action. There are practical steps that this Government can take now.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way; he has been very generous with his time. We are being asked to believe that the solution is more complex restructuring, borrowing, negotiations and concessions. However, according to recent reporting, Thames Water will have incurred almost £2 billion in financing costs and restructuring fees over the last 18 months. Meanwhile, my constituents' bills are going up. Does he think that is fair?

Paul Davies: I absolutely do not think that is fair. That comes to the nub of what we are talking about: the total lack of fairness in how the sector is operated and its impact on all our citizens.

Jim Dickson: Will my hon. Friend give way on the subject of Thames Water?

Paul Davies: I will, and then I will have to make some progress—that is just a warning to other hon. Members.

Jim Dickson: For my constituents, the performance of Thames Water is a continual source of huge frustration, not least its failure to fix a long-running leak at Swanscombe station. However, a particularly egregious example of poor customer service is its failure to fit a water meter to the house of my constituent, Mr Richard Jones, despite it only requiring a small adjustment to the outside of his house to do so. As a result, he is paying an assessed household charge and therefore paying far more for his water than he should be. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is an example of incredibly poor service by Thames Water?

Paul Davies: I absolutely agree. Many of us are now customers of Thames Water; I have Yorkshire Water and Thames Water. I am sad to say that I have not been impressed as a customer with either, but what has happened to that gentleman is just not acceptable.

There are practical steps that the Government can take now. One option is for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to conduct a feasibility study of alternative models to ensure that public ownership has been given due, fair and full consideration. I understand that previously the Department has cited a total cost of £100 billion for full nationalisation, which it based on the regulatory capital value of the sector. However, that approach has been widely criticised as misleading for failing to represent the accurate market value of a company. For example, Thames Water's RCV is more than £20 billion, yet the 2025 rescue bid from Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Co., before it walked away, valued the equity at around £4 billion because the company's debts had all but wiped out the value of the capital base. A feasibility study would provide full transparency and accuracy.

It is also true that the Government face a more imminent crisis with the likely collapse of Thames Water. Here there are several options, including a special administration regime. Although that is technically a temporary form of nationalisation, it would allow the Government to test the waters for more far-reaching reform. Without an SAR water companies will know that, no matter how bad it gets, there is no real sanction. The credibility of the regulation will be fundamentally undermined.

In the spirit of devolution we must strive for a water sector that is decentralised, democratic and that serves the interests of our communities. There are strong precedents for that. Some hon. Members may be familiar with the example of Berlin's water utility, which was re-municipalised following a grassroots campaign in the early 2010s. That was driven by demands for greater transparency and accountability, issues that have already been raised several times in interventions in this debate. Today, Berlin's water provision is managed by a 16-person board with eight shareholder representatives appointed by the state of Berlin and eight employee representatives elected through workforce representation mechanisms.

International evidence shows that long-term democratic involvement in running our water sector is essential to rebuild trust and to secure stronger outcomes. It also has practical benefits. The cost of regulation will fall when information becomes open and transparent, and

it will provide a lasting guarantee that water is run in the interests of the public, not those of the private sector. At its heart, this debate is about the right of the public to have their say over one of the most basic and essential services.

If we are serious about setting a new political path, as the Prime Minister has said, we must heed the call of campaigners such as Ash and deliver a water system that is innovative and sustainable to underpin the essential infrastructure of our economy and the health of our nations. We must be brave in our approach. We need to look at history and the decisions of past Governments. We do not remember small-scale reforms or tinkering with a broken system. We remember those who had the courage to rewire the state and deliver lasting change. This Government now face that moment. They must choose whether to preserve a failed model or to deliver a system that is stronger and more accountable. The choice is clear: it is time to put water back into public ownership.

Several hon. Members rose—

Paula Barker (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members to bob if they wish to be called to speak. Given the level of interest in this important debate, I will immediately impose a time limit of two and a half minutes. It is up to speakers if they wish to take interventions, but they can see how many colleagues wish to speak.

4.57 pm

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I am delighted to speak to this petition. It is about a really important issue, particularly in my constituency of Newton Abbot where we have Dawlish Warren, which is the place where "Dirty Business", which showed the tragic death of Heather Preen, was filmed. I met Heather's mother Julie when she came to this House, which was truly sobering.

I have the River Exe and the River Teign in my constituency. Both of them suffer. We are not dealing with water in the right way; I think that is plain to see. Quite how much hon. Members will say anything different in this debate I am not sure, but it is clear that we need to make a change. The experiment of 1989 failed. Heather died only 10 years after that, and we can see that investment was not being made. South West Water proudly says that it invests £13 billion in the system, but it pays out more than half of that in dividends. That is just wrong.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): On the hon. Member's point about the failure to invest, in Basingstoke South East Water's failure to invest in the Surrey hills pipeline has resulted in over-abstraction of the Greywell fen, which is destroying our chalk streams, holding up the local plan, which means that homes cannot be built, and risking water scarcity for existing residents. Does the hon. Member agree that investment is at the heart of the failure and that whatever model we choose must deliver investment to deliver change in all those aspects?

Paula Barker (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members to face the Chair, not other hon. Members.

Martin Wrigley: I absolutely agree with the hon. Member for Basingstoke (Luke Murphy). There is only one place where money comes from to make those investments. The water companies cannot borrow more money. Their money does not come from the investors. The investors are sitting there; that is the original £5 billion that was made available to buy the companies in the first place. That money comes only from the customers' bills or from Government—the customers' tax. That is why water companies must move into public ownership and more particularly into mutual ownership so that the customers own the company. They would then be investing in their own future, not in somebody else's profits.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Martin Wrigley: I will make progress.

I welcome the change to a single regulator, which was set out in the White Paper, but it has been clear for years that Ofwat has not had the teeth or the understanding to avoid the water companies turning into financial instruments dealing with very complex debt deals. That is where things have gone wrong, and we have to change it.

We should look differently at how we fine companies for their behaviour, prior to taking them into some form of public ownership. I strongly believe that when we find them funds, the money cannot simply come from customers' bills. We see companies such as Thames Water putting off paying their bills for years, and that must not happen. Personally, I believe that we should look at other ways of fining the water companies, perhaps even through shares or something that hits shareholders, rather than customers. That is the only way we will have any control over these companies until we make the change.

In the meantime, we have had citizen science groups such as Friends of the River Teign and Friends of the River Exe testing water daily over the summer. It is rarely green; it is always polluted. This is a major problem. We have people swimming in the seas who rely on citizen science testing to see what is happening. I congratulate campaign groups on their efforts, but the fact that they have to do such testing is reprehensible, and it should not be happening in the 21st century. We have to take the water companies out. We have to put them under public ownership. I urge the Minister to do so quickly.

5.1 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak in this debate under your illustrious chairmanship, Mrs Barker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) on leading it, and I thank him for being so generous with his time. I also thank the members of the public who are in the Gallery, including Ash Smith, Julie Maughan, Rob Forrester and all the other campaigners, citizen activists and citizen scientists who have got us to the point where this is one of the hottest topics in politics at the moment.

The people who built our water system understood something that we in this place have forgotten. One of them said that

“all monopolies which are in any way sustained by the State ought to be in the hands of the representations of the peoples”.

Members and those in the Gallery may like to guess who said that. Was it Leon Trotsky? Was it Tony Benn? Well, it was actually Joseph Chamberlain, who ended his career as a Conservative Cabinet member. Many of the Victorians understood that public ownership is not ideological; it is pragmatic.

Sir John Hayes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Clive Lewis: I will take one intervention, because I know that time is short.

Sir John Hayes: It is apposite that the hon. Gentleman should do so, because Joe Chamberlain is a great hero of mine; indeed, his portrait sat in my office when I was a Minister. What Joe Chamberlain understood was the balance between private interest and the public investment and public accountability that the hon. Gentleman describes. That is entirely compatible with the views of people across this Chamber and should not really be seen in Chamberlain's terms; it should be seen as doing what is right by the people and for the people.

Clive Lewis: I agree 100% with the right hon. Member. Joseph Chamberlain is the father of municipal government and municipal socialism in many ways, and he is someone we in this place can look to.

I know that time is short, and I want to get to one key point. This debate taps into something far deeper than the yah-boo politics between those on different sides of the House: a deep public anxiety about the future of this country and this planet. People instinctively understand that something is wrong. This summer, we all watched as this country burned. We know that droughts are on their way, and we know that AI is possibly out of control. Housing, energy, water and food are things that people want under public control, not in the hands of corporations, billionaires and millionaires.

When droughts and food insecurity hit, and when we cannot get access to social care or healthcare, we understand that the public need to be able to make the decisions as to who gets what, including water. Water is vital to everything from industry, to agriculture, to people having something to drink. Given that this country may soon face a water shortfall of 5 billion litres a week, and that the national risk register suggests there is a one in four chance that parts of the country will no longer be able to have people living there, because they will have to be evacuated due to severe water shortages, there is no choice but for the Government finally to grasp the nettle and bring not just water but every critical asset this country has, from data, to health, to housing, back into public ownership where people need it—under our control, owned by us.

5.5 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): My constituents want clean rivers, reliable water, functioning sewerage infrastructure and value for money. What they want is not necessarily a change in the ownership of water companies, but proper regulation, proper investment and proper accountability. Thames Water lost 136 litres per property per day in 2024-25—the worst performance in England and Wales—and South East Water, which

[Gregory Stafford]

also covers my constituency, lost almost 106 litres per customer per day. How can we ask customers to conserve water, as we have been doing over the past few months, when Thames Water and South East Water are losing so much of it?

Likewise, sewage discharges, especially those into the River Wey in my constituency, are disgraceful, although we know about them only because the previous Conservative Government started measuring them.

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we could improve the regulation of water companies by ensuring we get independent audit and monitoring of the data from them? In Folkestone and Hythe, two beautiful beaches in Romney Marsh are subject to “Do not swim” warnings, partly because Southern Water comes up with the data, the Environment Agency agrees with it and nothing happens. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that important change to our system needs to happen?

Gregory Stafford: I am afraid I do not know every word in the 2024 Labour manifesto, but I believe that a lot of what the hon. Gentleman is saying is in it, and I would encourage him to ask the Minister those very questions.

I have joined the River Wey Trust for water testing, and I know that Thames Water is now undertaking phosphorus removal upgrades at the Farnham treatment works serving my constituency. However, a key question I want to ask the Minister is, will they be delivered in a timely manner?

On infrastructure, when I last met Thames Water representatives, they told me it had inaccurate records for around 30% of its infrastructure. How can a modern water company properly manage its network if it does not even know what infrastructure it has? South East Water provides drinking water for the majority of my constituency, and it has received a £22.5 million Ofwat fine, yet leaks in my constituency take weeks to be sorted.

Those are symptoms of an ageing network that requires proper investment and maintenance, and that is not cost-free. Nationalisation does not repair pipes, make treatment works cheaper or remove the need for investment; it transfers the financial risk—potentially £100 billion—to taxpayers, and it still requires regulation, which is clearly failing at the moment.

I draw the attention of right hon. and hon. Members to what has happened to South Western Railway since it was nationalised: cancellations are up, trains are shorter and delays have doubled. Why would my constituents believe that the nationalisation of water would be any more successful than this Government’s nationalisation of the railways?

Luke Myer: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gregory Stafford: I will not, because lots of other people want to speak—I apologise.

My constituents are not asking whether the water companies are private or public; they are asking why their water company loses water through leaks, allows sewage into the River Wey and sometimes struggles

even to maintain basic infrastructure. Is not the real test of this Government whether they can force these companies to perform better, as they promised in their manifesto, rather than simply changing their ownership? The choice is not between doing nothing and nationalisation. The challenge is to ensure that we have strong regulation, proper investment and real consequences for failure, without putting the bill on the taxpayer.

5.9 pm

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Barker. I am grateful to the 208,000 people who signed the petition. For many of my constituents, this debate could hardly be more timely. Last month, a burst water main on Bramley Road left thousands of households across Enfield North without water, or experiencing low pressure for many days. Around 4,500 properties were affected. Thames Water’s own planning identified almost 3,000 priority services register customers in affected areas, and 24 tankers were deployed.

However, those figures alone cannot describe the complete misery caused for my constituents. One told me:

“I’ve been a resident in Lavender Hill for 27 years and I’ve never had to endure the incident that I am currently facing. I live in flats and have had NO water for over 3 days.”

Many others described the distressing impact on the most basic aspects of everyday life, including cooking, drinking, washing and sanitation. In response, I managed to persuade the local Morrisons store to make its industrial washing machines and dryers available free of charge, and I am really grateful to it for that.

Let us be clear: this was not just an inconvenience; for many, it was a crisis. The disruption even reached Chase Farm hospital, where operating theatres lost their water supply, forcing operations to be cancelled for two days while emergency tankers were brought in.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): Is the situation my hon. Friend describes—Thames Water not being there when crises happen, while at the same time hugely increasing customers’ bills and failing to invest in infrastructure—not exactly why we cannot have a sweetheart deal with its creditors and shareholders? They must be held to account; they cannot continue with their record of failure on the backs of hard-working Londoners.

Feryal Clark: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. When a failure in water infrastructure can disrupt NHS treatment, we are no longer talking simply about poor customer service; we are talking about critical national infrastructure.

What made this incident particularly unacceptable was not simply the fact that a pipe burst—we all know that infrastructure can fail—but what happened afterwards. My constituents faced conflicting information about whether their water would return, and they struggled to contact Thames Water. Bottled water stations were located in places that were extremely difficult for elderly and disabled residents to reach without a car. When I raised that issue with Thames Water, this was its extraordinary response:

“It’s not uncommon for us to set up bottled water stations in the London area without considering residents without a vehicle.”

Think about that: an essential utility provider responding to an emergency affecting thousands of people admits that it does not routinely consider whether vulnerable customers can actually reach the emergency water it provides. If an essential service fails, surely the absolute minimum people should expect is to be told what has happened, what they should do, where they can get help and when the service should be fixed.

This experience inevitably raises a much bigger question: who is our water industry ultimately being run for? I welcome the Government's determination to strengthen regulation, but we should also ask whether regulation alone can solve the problem.

5.13 pm

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Barker. I speak today on behalf of not just my constituents but my rivers. The Avon, Alne, Arrow and Stour in my Stratford-on-Avon constituency are part of the ecosystem of the mighty Avon. They are all central to our communities, wellbeing, local environment and wildlife. However, the current privatised water system has failed the public and the environment.

First, I want to thank the many citizen science projects in my constituency and the campaign groups across the country. Without their tireless work and water testing, much of this scandal would have remained hidden. That community effort is also matched by growing public anger about sewage discharge into rivers and seas, and about executives receiving large bonuses while customer bills rise and rise.

A model of public ownership could be for the water companies to become mutually owned. That would mean greater accountability, with a focus on public benefit rather than shareholder profit; executive boards that include environmental experts and local citizens groups; and a greater investment in infrastructure, with any profits reinvested into the water system. Public ownership would make it much easier to manage water collectively, as a social good rather than a commodity. That would make solutions such as sustainable drainage systems, sponge cities and controlling pollution at source not only feasible but easier to implement.

We in Stratford-on-Avon want clean, thriving waterways, and we will not stop campaigning until this mess is sorted out.

5.15 pm

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for opening this petition debate so well and for representing the petitioners and campaigners here today.

My constituency of Shipley is fortunate to be home to two beautiful rivers: the Aire and the Wharfe, where people walk, exercise, enjoy nature and spend time with family and friends. The rivers should contribute enormously to residents' quality of life, but from Bingley to Burley in Wharfedale, residents are afraid to let their children paddle or swim in the rivers because of the health risks created by the illegal dumping of human waste. Just last summer, one of my constituents in Bingley, a boy of seven, was left fighting for his life with E. coli poisoning. He suffered multiple organ failure, and he needed emergency

operations and kidney dialysis to beat the infection. It is absolutely disgraceful that, so much time after the first tragic death that was vividly depicted in a Channel 4 documentary, private companies are still allowed to abuse our rivers and put profit before people and nature.

Why are we in this terrible situation? As others have said, in 1989, the Tory Government did what no other country has done—there is no international precedent for this—and put the stewardship of our most precious natural resource into the hands of private companies. We were told that private ownership would bring investment, efficiency and innovation. Instead, we have seen rising debt, rising bills and more pollution in our rivers. It is claimed that there is no evidence that public ownership leads to better outcomes, yet in Paris, where there has been remunicipalisation, there has been improved service quality and water quality, and a reduction in price. In fact, water bills in Paris are about a third lower than they are for my constituents under Yorkshire Water.

We must act now to prevent further harm being done to children like the boy in my constituency by the likes of Yorkshire Water and Thames Water. I join others in urging the Government to put Thames Water into special administration and to be bold in bringing forward a water reform Bill that goes beyond the Cunliffe commission and sets out a legal framework that will enable us to build back a publicly owned water sector.

5.17 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I thank the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for setting out the case so well. I also thank my constituents for signing this petition; my constituency is ranked 10th for the number of constituents who signed it, with 866 signatures.

Before I get into the usual damning of Thames Water, I want to put something on the record. However corporately dysfunctional Thames Water is, there are a lot of good people who work for it. I thank the frontline teams and their managers, who have engaged on issues such as the flooding on Ladygrove in Didcot and restoring Wallingford's Mill brook, and who attended a flooding summit at East Hanney last year.

Corporately, however, Thames Water is not working, and that lets down its customers and workers. Last year, it discharged sewage into our rivers and lakes for more than 107,000 hours—yet another example of Thames Water failing its customers and the environment, and of the regulator, Ofwat, failing the British public. Despite serving 16 million people with a vital public service, Thames Water is operating with £23 billion of assets in urgent need of repair and close to £20 billion of debt, which it has said it cannot repay—a third of customers' bills are spent servicing that debt. In that context, it is unclear how Thames Water is the right organisation to be responsible for delivering the proposed White Horse reservoir, the estimated costs for which have already increased from £2.2 billion to £7.5 billion.

Certainly, special administration is the right thing for Thames Water, but the subject of the e-petition is public ownership. We assume that nationalising organisations automatically leads to good delivery, but the evidence on this is mixed at best. It would come as a surprise to users of train services in the north of England, delivered

[Olly Glover]

by Network Rail, which was nationalised nearly a quarter of a century ago, and Northern Rail, which was nationalised more than half a decade ago, to learn that nationalisation automatically leads to brilliance. That is why, instead of nationalisation, the Liberal Democrats are calling for water companies to become mutually owned public benefit corporations—owned by customers, professionally managed and not driven by shareholder profit—with effective regulation.

On the proposed delivery mechanism, a referendum, I still personally have PTSD from the 2016 one. Instead, we should add this to the Prime Minister's list of things on which he needs to forge a cross-party consensus.

5.20 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): I hope I do not shock my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies), who made an excellent speech in opening this debate, when I say that I do not want a referendum to bring the water industry back into public ownership. I just want Ministers to get on and do it. The Secretary of State has the power under the Water Industry Act 1991 to petition the High Court for any water company to lose its licence for either poor performance or insolvency.

Poor performance? Discharging untreated sewage into our waterways across England and Wales 568,674 times in just one year—I call that poor performance. That is the reason that Ofwat and the Environment Agency have been imposing fines of more than £100 million a time on water companies. No river in England meets good chemical status, and only 14%—one in seven—achieve good ecological status overall.

Section 94 of the Water Industry Act sets out that companies have a principal duty to provide sewerage systems. They also have a principal duty to comply with their statutory duties under regulation 4 of and schedule 2 to the Urban Waste Water Treatment (England and Wales) Regulations 1994. The Secretary of State can apply to put a company into a special administration regime if it has contravened, or is likely to contravene, any principal duty. They have; she should.

On insolvency, let us turn to Thames Water's disservice of my constituency of Brent West. Under section 24 of the Act, the company can be taken into an SAR if it "is or is likely to be unable to pay its debts".

Thames Water's gearing is 88%. Major pension funds have written off their £956 million stake in the company, and it has failed its licence obligation to maintain investment-grade status.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Barry Gardiner: No, I will not.

The company's credit rating is now junk status. The only way it claims it can pay its bills is if the regulator allows it not to do its job of meeting its environmental performance obligations.

For goodness' sake, we do not need a referendum. We need a Secretary of State who is prepared to use the legislation that was provided for the purpose of defending the public.

5.23 pm

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I thank the many constituents who signed this petition. We have heard a range of views from across the Chamber on the best ownership model, but we can surely agree that the current model is untenable, is unsustainable and lacks democratic involvement. No one wants it except the water bosses themselves.

My constituents continue to write to me to express their dissatisfaction with the system. Our local waste water company is Wessex Water. The former chief executive, Colin Skellett, received an £170,000 bonus from parent company YTL Utilities in 2024, despite a Government ban on performance-related payments following criminal pollution convictions. Accounts covering the period to June 2025 show that the Malaysian-owned parent company paid Mr Skellett remuneration of £693,000 in total. Wessex Water was subject to a bonus ban after being criminally convicted in November 2024 over a sewage pumping station failure.

My hon. Friend the Member for Frome and East Somerset (Anna Sabine) condemned this passionately, but I am sorry to say that since then things have not got any better. Our rivers are not cleaner, our infrastructure has not seen significant upgrades and our water bills have not gone down. However, Ruth Jefferson, the current chief executive of Wessex Water, has received a 14% pay increase, from £590,000 to £671,000—well above inflation. Environment Agency data shows that last year the company released 190,666 hours of raw sewage into the waterways—equivalent to about 21 years of continuous spillage. How many of our constituents got a 14% pay rise for failing to do their job so spectacularly? People recognise it for what it is.

Mutual ownership by customers would put an end to this mockery. It would allow profits to be reinvested in infrastructure rather than being paid to shareholders. It would allow legally binding priorities to be set—*[Interruption.]*

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Claire Young: I will—thank you.

Peter Swallow: I will give the hon. Lady a chance to drink some water, which is, of course, what we are all here to talk about. It is important to my constituents, and I know to hers. I will let her carry on with her fantastic speech.

Claire Young: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I was trying to say that mutual ownership would allow legally binding priorities to be set so that companies would have to protect the environment, provide clean water and provide standards that we do not have at the moment.

I want to say one other thing: it is not just the default local water company that deals with waste water. On many modern estates, private companies that are separate to the default water company for the area are taking the waste, and there are no guarantees. If they fail, the responsibility for that waste reverts to Wessex Water in our case, and it may end up taking on even more

inadequate infrastructure than it already has. That is something else to consider when we are discussing this issue.

5.26 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Barker.

We have all seen the price of failure. “Dirty Business” hit us hard with the true cost—the human cost—and the scale of sewage and chemicals. Professor Alistair Boxall is drawing to our attention the pollutants that are destroying our river health and ecology and causing our rivers to die, but also the money and how it flows—the revolving doors and the completely unaccountable power within the water industry.

Of course, when we see the revolving doors between regulators and companies, we know that we cannot trust the system. Our constituents cannot trust the system as they are fleeced to pay more for the profits of these companies—of these now millionaires who are allowing sewage to run through our cities. York has the second-worst polluted river, the River Ouse. We see floods and droughts in our city, and burst pipes that are unaddressed for days. We see the cost to our constituents.

The Minister must bring water into public ownership, and must not prevaricate or look for a different route. Plain and simple—let’s just get on with it. We have heard how we can bring forward an SAR to bring those companies and contracts back into public hands. I also say to the Minister that I have looked at this issue over the summer, and it is vital that we look at how we hold public institutions to account, who makes decisions and how the public can have a say.

As politicians, all we can often do is come to this place and plead, and use our campaigning platform to speak of the challenges we see, but we do not have power and leverage over systems. Setting up public ownership is important so that we and the public have leverage over the system. The public would have the ability, through a deliberative process and a citizens assembly, to hold water companies—public companies—to account so that they can get the answers that they deserve.

5.28 pm

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker.

I thank the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for opening the debate, which could not have come at a more poignant time for my constituents. Just weeks ago, flash flooding tore through properties, and more than 60 homes suffered internal flooding. In the worst cases, water reached a metre deep. Among those affected were an elderly man with limited mobility who had to leave his home, and a mother caring for her severely disabled daughter who was at risk of losing the electricity supply needed to maintain essential medical equipment. Those are just a few examples to show the severity of the challenge we face and the human cost that comes with inaction.

Worse still, the problem is not new. Perry Beeches flooded badly 10 years ago. We have known for years that the neighbourhood is vulnerable, yet our infrastructure remains unfixed, our manhole covers remain blocked and our rivers continue to flow with sewage and waste—not

to mention the subsidence across our city caused by leaking water pipes. The cost of our water companies doing nothing is paid in ruined homes, destroyed possessions and frightened families.

What are my constituents paying for? Severn Trent’s average combined household bill has risen by around 10% this year, and yet constituents find themselves paying more for less. It is clear that the industry is broken when a company can record more than 36,000 sewage spills lasting more than 200,000 hours and still achieve the Environment Agency’s top environmental rating of four stars.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): We have heard a lot about constituents getting sick; one of my Padstow constituents was hospitalised just a few weeks ago. On the hon. Member’s point about the Environment Agency’s ratings, Surfers Against Sewage says that 80% of hospitalisations come from bathing waters judged “good” or “excellent” by the Environment Agency. Does he agree that it is a nonsense to have a regulator like that?

Ayoub Khan: Absolutely. By way of example, how can an organisation receive a four-star rating when it is performing so badly?

Privatisation was sold on the promise that private capital would deliver investment and relieve pressure on the public purse, but with Thames Water amassing £20 billion in debt and due a Government bailout, that is clearly not the case anymore. Around the world, 90% of water is under public ownership, and yet 100% of ours is privately owned. It is not always wise to follow the crowd, but this is clearly something that we have gotten wrong.

My constituents are not asking Parliament to pretend that public ownership has no cost; they know it has a price. All they are asking us is to find out whether the price can really be greater than chronic underinvestment, rising bills, sewage-filled rivers, flooded homes and a system in which the public carry the risk while private investors take all the reward.

5.32 pm

Abtissam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker.

Water is a basic natural resource, essential for public health and hygiene, but it is trapped in one of the largest ever private monopolies: we cannot choose water from a less polluted waterway or stop paying bills that rise faster than inflation, and we cannot even change suppliers. As others have said, under Thatcher, our water and sewerage system was sold off with a clean slate: £5 billion in debt was wiped and companies were given a cash boost to the tune of £1.5 billion. Yorkshire Water has paid shareholders £7.6 billion in dividends since 1989, and it has £6.2 billion in debt. That is unacceptable. Resident bill payers have paid the price.

Every promise of a better system has completely collapsed under the weight of this monopoly. On Addy Street in Upperthorpe in my constituency, residents are no strangers to jets of water coming out of the ground. The most recent instance was not the first, second or even third time that they had seen a burst main, but the fourth. These are no longer unique occurrences; they are endemic to a system that is at breaking point.

[*Abtisam Mohamed*]

We have to be transparent: mounting corporate greed across England will not be wished away by making it easier to sack failing chief executives or imposing greater fines on companies. The personnel are not the problem. The problem is the system of deriving massive profit from life's essential needs. Although I welcome the Government's planned reforms, I urge them to go further than public control and regulation, and work to bring the system back in house.

Four hundred and thirty-four of my constituents have signed the petition that we are discussing today, and 440 more in Walkley have signed local activist Hannah Cawley's petition calling for water to be brought into public ownership. They are calling for an end to stakeholder payouts, and for cleaner rivers, lower bills and real accountability. That is the least that they deserve. Sheffield, like the rest of the country, has paid enough for this failure. It is time to bring water back into public ownership, and it is time to put the people who depend on it first.

5.34 pm

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. After successive years of failure, we need a water sector that serves people, not profit. We in the Green party have long made a cast-iron pledge to support bringing water back into public ownership. During its passage, I attempted to expand the powers of the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 to enable environmental failures—not just insolvency—to trigger Government intervention, and I backed a cross-party amendment on mutual ownership. The Government rejected both, and public ownership itself was denied any place in the legislation by the Minister.

Over the last three and a half decades, we have seen companies ripping off consumers while failing to invest in our crumbling infrastructure. While investors receive billions in dividends, the system needs its biggest ever investment programme. More than £50 billion has been pocketed by shareholders since privatisation, while around £16 billion is needed in the next few years just to fix storm overflows and solve poisonous nitrate pollution. Instead of pouring money into profits and managing failures, we need to build a system that is fit for the future. It is no wonder that this privatisation experiment has failed: water is a public resource and a natural monopoly.

Fantastical figures are used to scare people off the pursuit of public ownership as a solution. The figure of £90 billion was first cooked up in a Social Market Foundation report paid for by—oh!—four prominent members of the water sector. The Government could leave the debt with the debt holders and look at alternative models, such as Common Wealth's economic assessment reflecting years of neglected infrastructure, companies struggling with insolvency, and debt leveraging for commercial survival. While costs would be incurred in facilitating the transfer, an honest valuation would put public ownership within reach.

As we see company debt and statutory fines loaded on to bills, record sewage spills and billions in dividend payouts, I implore the Government to set out a timetable to restore our water to public ownership and end Thatcher's failed 37-year privatisation experiment.

5.36 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford) (Lab): It is clear today that the privatisation of water was one of the biggest cons in British history. We have seen water bills rise by 44% in real terms since privatisation, rivers polluted, infrastructure deteriorate and shareholders extract to the tune of £85 billion from our water industry. Regulation has failed to fix it; we have to be honest about that. Water companies have been fined millions of pounds, but that has demonstrably failed to change their behaviour. Chronic underfunding of the Environment Agency and failures by Ofwat have meant that even the limited regulatory powers available have too often gone unenforced.

I am pleased that the Prime Minister understands these issues, because it is time to bring water back into public ownership. There is an economic case for doing it: Professor David Hall's research estimates that public ownership could reduce financing costs by between £3.2 billion and £5.8 billion a year. That is money that could be invested in repairing pipes, tackling leaks, improving sewerage infrastructure, protecting our rivers and keeping bills affordable.

But I must stress that public ownership has to mean much more than putting a Government sign above the door. Public control cannot mean just some sort of franchise model with the pretence of overarching Government control, or the odd token councillor sitting on a water company board. That will solve nothing. We need regional publicly owned water companies with democratic accountability and meaningful representation for workers, customers and communities.

The revenues from water bills should be used to operate and improve the service, not provide returns to shareholders; investment should be planned for the long term; and environmental protection has to be at the very heart of the industry. Of course, that has a cost—we have to be honest—but we already know from research that public ownership would pay for itself within around seven years, with savings thereafter. We do not need a referendum; we need to take water back into public ownership now.

5.39 pm

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) on his eloquent speech, and I thank everyone who signed the petition and the people in the Public Gallery—it shows how much interest there is in this issue.

Since the water companies were privatised, they have paid out billions in profits, taken on billions of pounds of debt, paid out millions of pounds in bonuses and put up bills. We have had hosepipe bans and sewage is being discharged into our local streams, beaches and waterways.

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): Surfers Against Sewage's submission to the independent water commission looked at five different public interest models for the water industry, each with its own strengths. Does my hon. Friend agree that there should be a culture of accountability to the wider public, not just to shareholders?

Dr Chambers: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. All the issues that I just highlighted were the result of a failure of regulation over decades, and it is absolutely time that we reform the way water companies are structured, owned and run.

We have sewage pouring into the chalk streams in Winchester—we have the River Itchen and the River Meon, and next door we have the beautiful Test valley—which are unique habitats with unique biodiversity. They are sites of special scientific interest. The salmon in southern chalk streams are genetically distinct from the salmon in the Atlantic ocean. The destruction of this type of habitat by sewage and pollution is ecological vandalism.

Businesses are also affected. A farmer contacted me because sewage discharged by Southern Water was ruining his crops. He had to get me and my office involved just to enter into a conversation with the water company to get the compensation he deserved.

People's health is affected. I heard just last week from a mother whose three-year-old baby has been hospitalised with potential liver failure because he was playing in a stream and she was unaware that sewage was being discharged into the waterway. I heard from a woman who got very sick after paddleboarding in a stream; she was unaware that sewage was discharged upstream. This is affecting businesses, health and our local environment.

Before I finish, I want to pay tribute to the dedication of the amazing citizen scientists who have worked to gather data so that we can hold water companies to account and know the situation on the ground. To name a handful, there is the Winchester Downs Cluster, the Upper Itchen Restoration group and the Environmental Farmers Group. One of our amazing local councillors, Margot Power in Alresford, has for decades been taking samples of invertebrates in the river to measure their health.

I also pay tribute to the Southern Water crew who work on the ground when there is a flood or a discharge, or a drain needs unblocking, often in terrible weather and often late at night. Those guys are doing a brilliant job. They work in companies that are not fit for purpose, in a system that needs to be reformed. We need to ensure that they have all the support they need to make sure we have fresh water and a clean environment, and that people's bills do not go up while directors get huge bonuses.

5.42 pm

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Barker.

Severn Trent customers in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire have seen their bills rise by 22% this year, and they are expected to rise by a further 47% by 2029. At the same time, Severn Trent reported pre-tax profits of £320 million in the last financial year, and the company's long-term incentive plan could raise the chief exec's annual remuneration to a staggering £3.1 million.

In 2024, Severn Trent was responsible for more than 300 pollution incidents, and in 2023 the company was responsible for over 60,000 sewage overflows. People living on Paddock Rise in Trentham recently had to deal with the most appalling situation of having raw sewage in their street, presenting a serious public health risk. I have raised many times the challenges faced by the village of Upper Tean, including constant flooding, blown manhole covers, the children's playground and the recreation ground being flooded with sewage water, and dead rivers with no fish.

New developments are creating additional challenges. Although water companies are consulted on planning applications, they are under no statutory obligation to ensure that they upgrade their mains infrastructure to meet increasing demand. Developers meet obligations, as they should; water companies should also do so—especially if we intend to build 1.5 million homes.

It is fundamentally wrong that my constituents in Stoke-on-Trent South are facing higher water bills and poor services, while profits are siphoned off into the pockets of shareholders and chief execs. Basic necessities that we all need to survive should not be privatised and subject to profit incentives. Water is a basic human right. Our water should be under public ownership, not “control”, whatever that means—I would appreciate it if the Minister could provide clarity on the difference—and we need to listen to the 208,000 people who signed the petition. We need a water renationalisation plan now, and ownership of our water to be returned back to the people of this country and out of the hands of shareholders—owned by us and run for us.

5.45 pm

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. It is no surprise at all that my constituency has the second highest number of signatures to the petition. For at least six years now, Whitstable in my constituency has been plagued by frequent releases of sewage pouring out into our sea. Combined sewage overflows are supposed to occur only in the event of extremely heavy rainfall or storms, yet every single time a drop or two of rain falls from the sky, we get alerts, and within minutes my inbox will start to ping.

In 2021, I held my first public meeting at which residents were able to directly challenge the bosses of Southern Water. It was very similar to the public meetings shown in “Dirty Business”, Channel 4's outstanding docudrama. The executives seemed taken aback by the frustration and anger and by the demand for answers; I suspect they really thought we might all be fobbed off by the kind of generic non-answers that I had been receiving as the local MP and as a member of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. Whitstable has been plagued by this for years, and by the smell of an unmanned treatment works. The smell was so bad that people could not hang out their washing or allow their children to play in the nearby play area. They had headaches, the visible sanitary products and human waste were revolting, and in the early hours of the morning they regularly heard alarms in the unmanned building—alarms to which nobody responded.

SOS Whitstable met at that meeting and formed an extremely active campaigning group that went on to raise a petition on water privatisation, which we delivered to No. 10 in December 2022. It has now received more than 250,000 signatures, all to make the water companies public again. I held more public meetings over the next two summers, which were essentially for all those who were being so let down. Southern Water showed us a slideshow of excuses and investments that it had been making. But fast-forward through campaigns and debates in this place and endless private meetings, and all my constituents agree: we need public ownership now.

5.47 pm

Dr Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for securing this debate.

What should be at the centre of a discussion about public ownership of water? I think it should be public health. Imagine a family spending an afternoon beside a river. The children are playing near the bank. One asks whether they can paddle. The parent looks at the water and hesitates. Hon. Members might think it is because the river is deep or flowing quickly, and they might be right, but just as importantly, the parent does not know what has been discharged into it. That should concern every one of us.

In Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket, the rivers connect our towns and surrounding villages. They should be places that communities enjoy and take pride in, not places from which parents feel they must warn their children away. Yet when we discuss the water and sewerage companies, the conversation too often begins with the company finances and ends with arguments about regulators. I think we should begin with the family beside the river.

Julie is the mother of Heather, who was just eight when she died in 1999 after contracting E. coli during a family holiday in Devon. Her family story featured in the Channel 4 drama that we have heard about. Julie continues to speak out, so that Heather is not forgotten and so that other families understand the risks, but behind that campaigning is a mother who should have been watching her daughter grow up. That is why I believe the case for public ownership of our water and sewerage companies must be made in terms of the people this essential service exists to protect.

The purpose of the water system should be straightforward: to provide clean, safe water. We need water and sewerage companies that have more actual engineers than financial engineers. Our constituents should not have to become experts in the sewage discharge maps before deciding whether to enjoy their local river. No parent should be left wondering whether an ordinary afternoon outdoors puts their child's health at risk. We cannot promise that open water will ever be entirely risk-free, but we can insist that preventable pollution be treated with the seriousness it deserves. Water is essential to life, and the way we own and manage it must reflect that.

5.49 pm

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. Sometimes public ownership is best, and sometimes private is; I have no ideological view either way, but when it comes to the water industry, privatisation has been nothing short of disastrous. The main reason is inadequate regulation. In their blind assault on quangos and the civil service, which continues to this day, the Conservatives cut funding for the regulator so badly that it entirely lost the ability to do its job. No one noticed all the sewage going into our waterways, because there was no one left to look.

Left to their own devices, water company bosses responded by extracting billions from the industry in excess profits while allowing the fabric of the system to slowly rot. It has all been exposed now and we know the

sorry truth, but however angry we feel, in most cases that money cannot be recovered because the original investors sold out long ago. In my area of Horsham in West Sussex, Southern Water was one of the worst offenders. Things were so bad that the former CEO Matthew Wright now faces criminal charges for presiding over fraudulent sewage data. Painful as it is, we are now obliged to pay for the same infrastructure investment all over again through higher bills.

Calum Miller: My constituents have strongly supported this petition because they feel ripped off by Thames Water. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government's refusal to consider special administration for Thames Water sends a signal to all other water companies that investing money in paying off bondholders is more important than sorting out the mess that is their infrastructure?

John Milne: My hon. Friend makes a strong point with which I very much agree. We have to find the funds to fix decades of neglect at a time of crisis in the national budget. For that to happen, it is absolutely essential that we be able to trust the water companies to do their job honestly the second time around. I flat out do not believe that we can do that without changing the present system of private ownership.

Personally, I am not opposed to renationalisation if it really can be done free, but I would be more confident asking for a mutual ownership structure, because that is clearly achievable. Mutual ownership prevents excess bonuses and profiteering. Residents can be confident that any new public money going into the industry will be spent on genuine improvements. Alongside that, we need a stronger regulator with the power to enforce quality.

More than 200,000 people signed the petition. That is a huge number, but I do not doubt that many millions more would have signed it if they had been aware of it. We put our blind trust in the water industry once, and it was abused. Once is enough.

5.52 pm

Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): May I say what a phenomenal pleasure it is to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker? You are a wonder. As the MP for half of England's best island, I feel uniquely placed to speak about the state of our water sector. Quite frankly, I think my constituents would never forgive me if I did not use this opportunity to highlight just how unacceptable the situation has become.

Since the 2024 election, there have been 14,902 hours' worth of sewage in my constituency alone. Across the island, that figure rises to 26,682 hours. It is little wonder that islanders feel utterly frustrated, deeply let down and increasingly sceptical about the idea that the system is supposedly delivering for them or that private companies can be genuinely trusted to act in their best interests.

On the island, we are immensely proud of our 57 miles of UNESCO biosphere-recognised coastline. It is part of what makes the Isle of Wight so special, but it is also why so many islanders find themselves utterly dumbfounded. The Prime Minister received a lot of flak last week for his comments about the damaging impact of the privatisation of the 1980s. The Benches opposite—not the Labour and Liberal Democrat Members

sitting there now; I mean the Opposition—mocked those remarks, but not even they could argue that the state of our water industry represents a ringing endorsement of Margaret Thatcher’s privatisation project.

Private equity has become so effective at fearmongering that Governments of all colours are reluctant to challenge the status quo. We hear figures, from companies that see our basic utilities as huge pound signs, that suggest that public ownership would cost £100 billion and would put workers or pension funds at risk, yet evidence from the People’s Commission suggests that public ownership could deliver a much fairer and more sustainable system than the one we have today. That is why we need to stop placing private equity on a pedestal.

Water is not a luxury. It is an essential public service. My preference will always be public control, especially when private companies have blown their chance, measured on performance, investment and public trust, and have resorted to fear stories about the alternatives. Our promise of hope in every heart and growth in every postcode will not feel real or achievable if people cannot do something as basic as trusting the water that comes out of their tap, or safely swimming in the seas that surround them.

5.54 pm

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. The case for public ownership of our water is unanswerable. We can all see the money being swindled out of the British public by the privatised system. We can all see the sewage pollution going on, even during a summer of drought. I beg the Minister, in her response, not to repeat the bogus figures that some use to argue that public ownership of one of our most essential national resources would be too expensive. Those claims have been so comprehensively debunked that using them now is just getting embarrassing.

The truth is that the cost of the societal impacts of failing to take back control of our water resources would be far higher than that of taking action now, because—ludicrously for a country as wet as ours—we are on course for a water deficit of more than 6 billion litres of water every single day in the next 30 years. The truth is that there is currently no credible plan to avert that. All the reservoirs that currently we have planned will reduce that deficit only by a meagre 13%. There is no realistic prospect of water companies hitting the efficiency targets they have signed up for, either—and that is before the speculative proliferation of data centres claims its thirsty share of our dwindling resources.

In all likelihood, we will face further and severe water shortfalls in the future. Fire services are already warning that water pressure in many areas is dangerously low for fighting the new wildfire season that we also face. Communities in my constituency have already seen the taps running dry. In the future, we will have to choose what we do and do not use water for. We cannot have a situation in which our democracy has to mediate the fundamental question of national security through the interests of private companies that have proven beyond all doubt that their overwhelming priority will always be profit. We cannot afford to leave our water in the hands of private vested interests. It must be brought back into public ownership.

5.57 pm

Irene Campbell (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for introducing this important debate. I also congratulate Ash Paul Smith, the petitioner, for all his hard work in creating the petition and gathering over 208,000 signatures.

The recent sewage spillages in Saltcoats in my constituency have greatly affected the bathing water quality in the coastal towns of Saltcoats, Ardrossan and Stevenston and have affected many constituents. On 29 June this year, a rising main pipeline near Saltcoats pumping station burst and a high amount of sewage was piped into our waters. That led to temporary repairs, which continued until 10 August, as there was apparently no easy or robust solution.

The advisory signage at the beach was not as clear as it could have been. That not only led to complaints, but confused many swimmers about the bathing quality of the water. Dog owners, too, were querying whether it was safe for dogs to go into the water, which of course it was not. Only two weeks after the public were told that they could swim again, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency confirmed on 25 August that the pollution was actually ongoing and further work on the pipe was required. That continued for a few days before the advice against bathing was withdrawn and safe swimming could be resumed. That is just not good enough.

For nearly the whole summer, constituents and visitors have been unable to swim at Saltcoats, Stevenston and Ardrossan. That is the height of the holiday season, and coastal communities rely on visits from day trippers, many of whom want to go outdoor swimming and enjoy our beautiful sandy beaches. It is important to highlight that the pipe is owned by Scottish Water, a public Scottish Government organisation. In 2021, Scottish Water oversaw untreated sewage being discharged 12,000 times in a single year. Water bosses are getting paid huge salaries everywhere, it seems—for delivering what, exactly?

I think it would be a good thing to take the water industry in England and Wales back into public ownership, but it is important to consider how we will successfully manage it. The sewage situation in Saltcoats serves as a reminder that public ownership does not necessarily mean good service. We need to get any future public ownership structures right, with robust accountability and governance to ensure a better service.

5.45 pm

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. It is no surprise at all that my constituency has the second highest number of signatures to the petition. For at least six years now, Whitstable in my constituency has been plagued by frequent releases of sewage pouring out into our sea. Combined sewage overflows are supposed to occur only in the event of extremely heavy rainfall or storms, yet every single time a drop or two of rain falls from the sky, we get alerts, and within minutes my inbox will start to ping.

In 2021, I held my first public meeting at which residents were able to directly challenge the bosses of Southern Water. It was very similar to the public meetings shown in “Dirty Business”, Channel 4’s outstanding docudrama. The executives seemed taken aback by the

[*Rosie Duffield*]

frustration and anger and by the demand for answers; I suspect they really thought we might all be fobbed off by the kind of generic non-answers that I had been receiving as the local MP and as a member of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. Whitstable has been plagued by this for years, and by the smell of an unmanned treatment works. The smell was so bad that people could not hang out their washing or allow their children to play in the nearby play area. They had headaches, the visible sanitary products and human waste were revolting, and in the early hours of the morning they regularly heard alarms in the unmanned building—alarms to which nobody responded.

SOS Whitstable met at that meeting and formed an extremely active campaigning group that went on to raise a petition on water privatisation, which we delivered to No. 10 in December 2022. It has now received more than 250,000 signatures, all to make the water companies public again. I held more public meetings over the next two summers, which were essentially for all those who were being so let down. Southern Water showed us a slideshow of excuses and investments that it had been making. But fast-forward through campaigns and debates in this place and endless private meetings, and all my constituents agree: we need public ownership now.

5.47 pm

Dr Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for securing this debate.

What should be at the centre of a discussion about public ownership of water? I think it should be public health. Imagine a family spending an afternoon beside a river. The children are playing near the bank. One asks whether they can paddle. The parent looks at the water and hesitates. Hon. Members might think it is because the river is deep or flowing quickly, and they might be right, but just as importantly, the parent does not know what has been discharged into it. That should concern every one of us.

In Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket, the rivers connect our towns and surrounding villages. They should be places that communities enjoy and take pride in, not places from which parents feel they must warn their children away. Yet when we discuss the water and sewerage companies, the conversation too often begins with the company finances and ends with arguments about regulators. I think we should begin with the family beside the river.

Julie is the mother of Heather, who was just eight when she died in 1999 after contracting *E. coli* during a family holiday in Devon. Her family story featured in the Channel 4 drama that we have heard about. Julie continues to speak out, so that Heather is not forgotten and so that other families understand the risks, but behind that campaigning is a mother who should have been watching her daughter grow up. That is why I believe the case for public ownership of our water and sewerage companies must be made in terms of the people this essential service exists to protect.

The purpose of the water system should be straightforward: to provide clean, safe water. We need water and sewerage companies that have more actual

engineers than financial engineers. Our constituents should not have to become experts in the sewage discharge maps before deciding whether to enjoy their local river. No parent should be left wondering whether an ordinary afternoon outdoors puts their child's health at risk. We cannot promise that open water will ever be entirely risk-free, but we can insist that preventable pollution be treated with the seriousness it deserves. Water is essential to life, and the way we own and manage it must reflect that.

5.49 pm

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. Sometimes public ownership is best, and sometimes private is; I have no ideological view either way, but when it comes to the water industry, privatisation has been nothing short of disastrous. The main reason is inadequate regulation. In their blind assault on quangos and the civil service, which continues to this day, the Conservatives cut funding for the regulator so badly that it entirely lost the ability to do its job. No one noticed all the sewage going into our waterways, because there was no one left to look.

Left to their own devices, water company bosses responded by extracting billions from the industry in excess profits while allowing the fabric of the system to slowly rot. It has all been exposed now and we know the sorry truth, but however angry we feel, in most cases that money cannot be recovered because the original investors sold out long ago. In my area of Horsham in West Sussex, Southern Water was one of the worst offenders. Things were so bad that the former CEO Matthew Wright now faces criminal charges for presiding over fraudulent sewage data. Painful as it is, we are now obliged to pay for the same infrastructure investment all over again through higher bills.

Calum Miller: My constituents have strongly supported this petition because they feel ripped off by Thames Water. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government's refusal to consider special administration for Thames Water sends a signal to all other water companies that investing money in paying off bondholders is more important than sorting out the mess that is their infrastructure?

John Milne: My hon. Friend makes a strong point with which I very much agree. We have to find the funds to fix decades of neglect at a time of crisis in the national budget. For that to happen, it is absolutely essential that we be able to trust the water companies to do their job honestly the second time around. I flat out do not believe that we can do that without changing the present system of private ownership.

Personally, I am not opposed to renationalisation if it really can be done free, but I would be more confident asking for a mutual ownership structure, because that is clearly achievable. Mutual ownership prevents excess bonuses and profiteering. Residents can be confident that any new public money going into the industry will be spent on genuine improvements. Alongside that, we need a stronger regulator with the power to enforce quality.

More than 200,000 people signed the petition. That is a huge number, but I do not doubt that many millions more would have signed it if they had been aware of it. We put our blind trust in the water industry once, and it was abused. Once is enough.

5.52 pm

Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): May I say what a phenomenal pleasure it is to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker? You are a wonder. As the MP for half of England's best island, I feel uniquely placed to speak about the state of our water sector. Quite frankly, I think my constituents would never forgive me if I did not use this opportunity to highlight just how unacceptable the situation has become.

Since the 2024 election, there have been 14,902 hours' worth of sewage in my constituency alone. Across the island, that figure rises to 26,682 hours. It is little wonder that islanders feel utterly frustrated, deeply let down and increasingly sceptical about the idea that the system is supposedly delivering for them or that private companies can be genuinely trusted to act in their best interests.

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[Irene Campbell]

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5.59 pm

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. The question of the water industry strikes at the heart of why so many of our constituents are angry—they are angry because they are paying more and getting less. In the case of water, it is even worse than that, because my constituents' hard-earned money is going directly as dividends and bonuses to shareholders and chief executives. Money from my poorest constituents stuffs the pockets of the wealthy, lots of whom do not even live in the UK. It is perhaps the most backwards redistribution of wealth that we have in this country. For them, it is win-win: they continue to profit while we pay higher bills to fix the failure of their reinvestment. Our money flows into these companies, but it is less clear how that money flows out.

[SIR JEREMY WRIGHT *in the Chair*]

That fundamental unfairness is why so many are calling on this place to act and why the Prime Minister was right in referring to the control that we have lost over the last 40 years under Governments of all colours. That loss of control has consequences, which are no more evident than in the pollution of our rivers and streams. The waters of Burton upon Trent made our town the brewery powerhouse of the world—those magical waters were home to a global ale empire. Fast-forward to today, and research has shown that the River Trent contains more *E. coli* than the average pub toilet. We see the failure to invest in blocked drains and clogged sewerage systems. My constituents in Stapenhill felt that last year when a water main burst on Stanton Road, leaving around 4,000 residents without a water service and causing significant traffic disruption. This is the fault of a system that was poorly designed decades ago and has not been reformed since.

Greater public control is not ideological; it is common sense. I am under no illusion as to the scale of the investment that is required, and I know that cancelling one set of bonuses will not deliver the scale of upgrades that we need. We should welcome the Prime Minister's efforts to raise the idea of public control. I am happy to consider all options on the table, but I will not accept that the current system is fit for purpose. This failing system is making my constituents poorer but the rich even richer, and that is why we must act.

6.2 pm

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): I welcome the fact that, under the Prime Minister's leadership, the conversation on public control of the water industry has fundamentally shifted. We must no longer bury our heads in the sand over the question of public control of the water sector, but we owe our constituents honest answers, not easy answers.

I am sure that there are few in this House who feel that they could credibly advocate that there is truly a cost-free form of nationalism out there—or for expropriation, as it more honestly should be called. Despite my background, I promise that I am very much not the “It's all about the bond markets” guy in this case. I think we all know, however, that there is no free lunch at scale when it comes to the overall cost of funding the industry. At the same time, this industry should never have been privatised in the first place, and immense sums have been extracted from it over the years. Although some of the more recent investment expectations under this Government have begun to temper that, the extraction is still happening in egregious cases such as that of Thames Water.

Let me briefly take Members through the four options for taking back control of the industry. Option one is a pragmatic approach to cost-free nationalisation, which says that even more stringent regulation would bankrupt the companies so that we could acquire them for nothing. The problem is that we can get as good of a deal with these companies as we like, but the British public would still have to foot the £100 billion-plus investment in upgrades over the next five years or so.

Option two is that we pay the full whack. I think we all know that RCV is not a fair market valuation, but when the debt, which needs to be paid down or taken on, is factored in, the figure is up to the better part of £100 billion. Even then, there is the investment on top of that.

Option three is to wait for the water companies to go bankrupt and then acquire them for next to nothing. Ofwat sees 10 of those companies with high financial risk, but the Government would still have to foot the infrastructure bill on a company-by-company basis—that would be cheaper, but slower.

Option four is to start with what the British public actually want to see from its water system and have a democratic conversation about what they are willing to invest to solve the problem. We then work out the impact that that has on the value of the industry. The reality is that we have already had that conversation—we know what the British public want because they have been shouting it from the rooftops, often in wetsuits with surfboards in hand.

I commend the work of the Good Growth Foundation, which has gotten to grips with some of the challenges and opportunities presented by the special administration scheme to take back control of the water industry for the public good, and enable us to take those profits and reinvest them into fixing our water system.

6.4 pm

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. Like some other Members, I am not keen on a referendum because I know the anger of my constituents. It is incumbent on us to just get on, have the conversation and come up with a solution.

Across my constituency, we currently have a wave of roadworks because of a lack of investment over years and the asset stripping of Thames Water. We have now realised that those Victorian pipes, which were not replaced because the company was asset-stripped, finally need to be replaced. That causes huge disruption for my

residents, and the cost of it has been placed on my Bexleyheath and Crayford constituents, who have seen increases of 30% to 40% on their bills over the last two years. They say to me there is no better example of having no control or of people in this place being powerless than the actions of Thames Water. I just shrug my shoulders—I continually bring the matter here, but I am not able to resolve the issue.

For the last five summers in Crayford town centre, we have had major leaks; the town centre has been closed for five successive summers. Let me give hon. Members an example of Thames Water's incompetency. Last year, I wrote to them and asked them to show me a map of all the leaks and flooding in the town centre. They sent that to me and it showed the scale of the problem, yet this summer, when a constituent raised concerns about the ongoing problems and I wrote to Thames Water, they said that they had no record of any flooding in Crayford town centre over the last five summers. That shows us that we are dealing with a company that is very difficult to meet—although I am actually meeting its representatives tomorrow—and very difficult to have any control over. It is no wonder that my constituents think it is incumbent on us to resolve that.

In principle, I want the company to be nationalised, but I just want a system—I hope to hear about this from the Minister later—that gives my constituents and me some accountability over bills and resolves the issues that cripple town centres and continually cause leaks, delays and roadworks.

6.7 pm

Sadik Al-Hassan (North Somerset) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. Thirty-seven years after privatisation, those companies are laden with debt, our rivers and coastlines are polluted and shareholders expect good returns while investment lags. That proof can be seen in North Somerset. One young man training for an Ironman in 2023 swam in Clevedon Marine lake, which was unfortunately polluted. Within a day, he had collapsed. It took four months of tests to confirm what had happened; a virus caught in that water had lowered his blood pressure and triggered a minor heart episode. That is what “acceptable” water quality is costing real people in my constituency.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I want to reiterate my hon. Friend's point because I have been contacted by users of Holme Pierrepont—the home of the National Water Sports Centre—which is in my constituency. It is meant to be a national standard venue, but because of pollution and sewage spills in the River Trent, there are cases of nausea, fever and vomiting. Does he agree that we need to do more about the public ownership of water companies so that we can deal with the environmental health impacts on users?

Sadik Al-Hassan: I agree. In my constituency, the Land Yeo river, which once ran clear and was a genuine source of local pride, is no longer the beautiful river that residents grew up with. Agricultural and urban runoff, as well as underfunding and a lack of investment, have left it choked with invasive plant species and thick algae.

In 2025, a storm overflow at Portbury Wharf nature reserve discharged sewage into the Severn estuary for a total of 721 hours—the equivalent of 30 full days of

waste pumped from North Somerset's shores. That is why I strongly welcome the swift introduction of the Water (Special Measures) Act, but it treats the symptom, not the disease. We are past the point of regulating out a structural failure. If a company's incentive is shareholder return rather than public service, no amount of fines will help.

Water is an essential utility, but as we saw this summer, the failure of these companies is already compounding the impact of climate change and drought. We had one of the wettest springs on record, yet the companies have failed to invest in reservoirs, such as in Barrow Gurney in my constituency, that are needed to capture one of the most valuable resources. Reservoirs in the south-west, which should be central to how we store and manage water, have suffered from years of under-investment, neglected by companies that are more focused on returns than resilience.

Nobody chooses their water company. Nobody can switch. But our constituents are paying the price through their health, their pride in local areas and their bills. The public deserve the chance to say whether that should continue.

6.10 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for introducing the debate.

My constituents are fed up of mismanagement, debt, and simultaneous price hikes and shareholder bonuses. They are also fed up of hosepipe bans, while water runs down our streets. Since April 2025, our bills have risen by 31%, and this year by an additional 3.4%. What do we get for that? Sewage dumps, burst pipes and drinking water that I advise all Members—if they do not know this—not to drink without boiling or filtering first. Thames Water is one of the worst polluters in England and, last year, got one star from the Environment Agency—I think that is only because it has not figured out how to colour in half a star or a quarter of it.

Unfortunately, Thames Water is not just crap; it is also full of crap—9,189 sewage spills last year alone, and nearly 592 million litres of water lost to leaks every single day. The company then has the cheek to call a hosepipe ban. The Thames cannot be seen from my constituency, but anyone who wants a riverside experience can just walk down Brixton Hill, where water is usually gushing from some leak, causing havoc and gridlocked traffic on the main road or some of the residential roads—a reality TV version of “The Hunger Games”, with residents scrambling for bottles of water that have been left there during an outage. Keeping the company under private ownership just delays the inevitable Government bailout—essentially, us paying twice.

I believe that the great privatisation experiment has failed in nearly every public service industry in which it has been tried. Some may call me ideological for this, but I point them to Thames Water as a case in point. We do not need a crystal ball, or even a referendum, to tell us that there would be overwhelming support for public ownership, so I ask the Minister: why has it not happened yet? Why has Thames Water not been put in special measures? Why will it not simply be brought under public ownership?

6.12 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. The current model for our water service is not working for customers and has not been working for quite some time. My constituents have watched their bills rise again and again while Thames Water falls further into debt and water bosses are rewarded with huge bonuses, despite failing to invest in critical infrastructure and allowing more sewage pollution into our rivers, lakes and streams.

These failures in investment, infrastructure and environmental performance have undermined public confidence, and customers have been unable to take their business elsewhere, because the water companies operate through regional monopolies. I commend the Government for trying to tackle some of those issues, but tougher regulation is not enough to deal with a model that is fundamentally broken. Thames Water is in approximately £19 billion of debt, but the rescue deal on the table is a market-led recapitalisation by its creditors that will keep the failing private ownership model intact in exchange for environmental leniency.

Water is an essential service and a natural monopoly, so it is reasonable to ask whether the interests of taxpayers are best served when the ownership of our water is determined by private investors. Bringing Thames Water into public ownership, either permanently or initially through a special administration regime, would allow the Government to write down debt on fairer terms than any creditor-led deal and to direct further revenue toward infrastructure and customers, rather than debt servicing and returns to shareholders.

We must restore public confidence and end the era of profiting from pollution and prioritising shareholder returns over taxpayers. Our water services are too essential to be treated simply as another commercial asset. The water privatisation of the 1980s is a failed ideological experiment that has seen profits plundered into the pockets of hedge funds and offshore investors, while the sector has been starved of investment. Not a single reservoir has been built since 1992, and there has been under-investment in our antiquated pipes and overflowing sewerage system.

Noah Law: Does my hon. Friend support our Labour Government's initiative to build more reservoirs for the first time in decades?

Bambos Charalambous: I support my hon. Friend 100%. We urgently need the infrastructure, because we have seen the impact of drought and the need for hosepipe bans as a result of not having the infrastructure in place.

As I was saying, not a single reservoir has been built since 1992, and the underinvestment in our antiquated pipes and overflowing sewerage system is plain to see. This is not good enough. That is why public ownership is the only way forward, and why I urge the Government to put Thames Water back into public ownership as soon as possible.

6.15 pm

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for leading this debate, and the gentleman who started the petition in the first place.

I am sure that, like me, my constituents are absolutely staggered that we are having a conversation about children getting ill from paddling in our streams and drinking our water. The Victorians built a load of sewers because they recognised that this was completely and utterly unacceptable, yet we do not seem to have managed to maintain them to the point that we can actually drink our water. That is crackers. The fact that we have to have a conversation about whether our water is fit to drink should raise alarm bells.

In the 30-odd years since privatisation, £85 billion has been paid out in dividends. I am genuinely astonished that so much money has been taken from the good people of this country and given to private interests without more outcry. I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary gardening and horticulture group. It is really important to note that the current arrangement does not just have implications for individuals—although they are horrific and I do not wish to underestimate them. It also has implications for horticulture businesses.

Our general access to water is appalling and is decimating businesses, which are paying very high utility costs across the board without being able to regularly access what they need. It is damaging our economy, and it is damaging our experience of the great outdoors. The amount that we are paying in bills is ridiculous, and 20% of treated drinking water in the UK is lost to leakage. I know that the Government have already taken some steps to improve the regulation of the water industry, but frankly we need to go further and faster.

I am so proud to represent a very beautiful area of the world. Many of my constituents have grown up playing in local rivers and streams, and people still allow their pets to go into the water, but most parents will not let their kids paddle in the same places where they used to paddle, because they know it is not safe. How have we got here? It is completely unacceptable. I know there are arguments about how much nationalisation would cost, and of course we have to consider that, but if the law prevents us from renationalising things that clearly should be renationalised, then—I speak as a lawyer—perhaps we should revisit the law. It is clear to our constituents that we need to move forward.

6.18 pm

Henry Tufnell (Mid and South Pembrokeshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy.

The Cleddau river flows through my constituency of Mid and South Pembrokeshire. It tells a proud history of Pembrokeshire, but more recently it has told a sadder story of the failures of our water sector. At Picton pumping station in Haverfordwest, the local campaigning organisation The Cleddau Project found that the equivalent of 17 tankers of sewage were being dumped into the Cleddau every day between July 2022 and February 2024. Between January and October 2025, there were nearly 4,000 hours of untreated sewage pollution at seven different sites in and around the Cleddau.

Given the history of Welsh Water, I caution Members advocating for a not-for-profit model of water ownership. As a member of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, I have spent many hours questioning water bosses, and it is clear to me that regulatory enforcement alone will not address the crisis that the

sector is facing. The problems are symptoms of a structure and a culture within these companies. There is too much focus on financialisation, rather than prioritising environmental stewardship and customers, and executives have too often been insulated from the consequences of their poor performance.

As has been eloquently described by Members today, the water sector is fundamental to public health, environmental protection and, crucially, our national security. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) on introducing this debate and on giving such an eloquent and passionate speech. It is vital that we seriously consider different forms of ownership; indeed, it is somewhat sad to me that this conversation has been so stifled in recent years. Nationalisation must form part of the conversation, and it must flow as a consequence of the continued failure of water companies. Does the Minister agree that if water companies cannot deliver for customers, the state must be prepared to step in and ensure that an essential service is run in the public interest?

6.20 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I start by thanking the more than 200,000 petitioners across the country, as well as the hundreds of my Leeds East constituents, who have signed the petition. When discussing the arguments for public ownership, we need to start by staring the facts in the face. England and Wales are the only countries in the world to have fully privatised their water and sewerage systems. We are the odd ones out, and something needs to be done about it.

The privatisation of our water system has been a catastrophic failure—not for shareholders, or for the chief executive of Yorkshire Water, but for the public, the environment and, as we have heard, even children. With climate change leading to further droughts and water shortages, the iniquitous role of the leaderships of private water companies, and the system they represent, will only get worse.

We hear a lot about Thames Water, but we also need to talk about Yorkshire Water. Under Yorkshire Water, bills have gone up by over a third in two years, and every year it dumps hundreds of thousands of hours of sewage into our rivers and seas. It is performing so badly that it has been downgraded to a one-star rating by the Environment Agency. Yorkshire Water was recently hit by an £89 million performance penalty for under-delivering, yet its chief executive's total salary is running at over £1 million a year, so privatisation has worked for some. That is rewarding failure—as long as the profits keep flowing.

Enough of all this: full public ownership is what is needed. Let us get into step with the rest of the world, focusing on cleaner water, lower bills and a system that actually works and is fit for the climate challenges of the future. People out there in the country know this is a disgrace, and they know it needs sorting out now. We need public ownership of our water system now.

6.23 pm

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): Banbury is heavily affected by the failings of Thames Water; we have had thousands of sewage spills, leading to hundreds of thousands

of hours of sewage being discharged into local rivers and streams, which is probably why so many of my constituents signed the petition. I had prepared a longer speech for the debate, but given the number of speakers and time available, I will keep my remarks much briefer.

In March, I wrote for LabourList that the water scandal had become a test of whether a Government elected on a promise of change were prepared to confront vested interests. Across England and Wales, water bills rose by 26% last year, but for Thames Water customers, including my constituents, they rose by 31%—and this year the bills have risen again.

During the Makerfield campaign, the Prime Minister said that Britain's water industry had become a system where

“the shareholders always win and the billpayers always lose”.

He was right. On Thames Water specifically, the Prime Minister argued that public ownership was ultimately something that should happen. Although I welcome the steps that this Government have taken to address the water industry, the fact that so many people have signed the petition would suggest—as would a glance at my mailbox, and probably that of every other Member of Parliament—that most people feel that, despite what those measures are intended to do, none of them quite goes far enough. My simple question to the Minister is this. What more are the Government prepared to do to demonstrate that they understand the scale of public anger, that they hear the public's frustration and that they are prepared to act with greater urgency in response?

6.25 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak with you in the Chair, Sir Jeremy.

Since being elected, I have heard repeatedly from constituents about flooding, sewage discharges and failures of basic water infrastructure. My constituency is served by Severn Trent Water and South Staffordshire Water—double the problem, some might say. Recently, I met South Staffs Water after concerns about the installation of meters without what many customers felt was adequate notice. The crux is that customers feel that they have zero influence over the decisions affecting them, and that companies do not seem to explain clearly why decisions are taken.

I heard from constituents in Chads Moor, for example, who have had to put up with water leaking out at incredible rates all around their properties and dangerously high water pressure for 11 months following the installation of meters. Whatever the ultimate cause, however, the refusal of the water companies to take responsibility for finding fixes is just another example of why their customers have lost trust.

On the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid and South Pembroke (Henry Tufnell) said, we grilled the chief executives of nine water companies and looked at many issues. Crucially, however, the corporate culture that has taken hold in the sector is so divorced from the lives of customers that it is really to blame for a lot of what we are discussing. Despite already knowing that public confidence was in tatters and that the sector was up sewage creek without a paddle, we were shocked by what we heard.

[Josh Newbury]

For me, questions of governance are as important as ownership. Who has control? Who carries risk? How is investment financed? What voice do customers have? The Government have recognised that the broken status quo cannot continue. Powers have been strengthened and Ofwat is to be replaced with a new unified regulator, but given the mammoth issues in the sector, we should ask, as so many have today, whether that is enough.

We cannot assume that public ownership would resolve all the issues. We should remember that some pre-privatisation water boards were failing their customers too. That is why, as a member of the Co-operative party, I hope that the Minister will look further at empowering customers and introducing mutual structures and co-operative principles. Our constituents rightly demand greater control over something so fundamental to their lives. Water is different from almost any other service, because we cannot take our money elsewhere. The test of the Government reforms should be simple: when people turn on their tap, look at their bill or walk by their local river, do they feel that the system is working in their interests? If the answer is no, we should have the courage to change it.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I call Becky Gittins. [Interruption.] Sorry, I have the wrong name on my list. I call Sarah Hall.

6.27 pm

Sarah Hall (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Sir Jeremy; it happens. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I support public ownership of our water industry. Water is an essential public service, and it should be run in the public interest. People in my constituency cannot suddenly decide that they have had enough of United Utilities and switch to another water company. They pay their bills because they need the service, and they should be able to expect it to work for them. In reality, however, across the country, that is not what is happening. After years of neglect, failure to upgrade infrastructure, sewage dumping in our waterways and skyrocketing bills, people have frankly had enough. We have spent decades trying to regulate these monopolies, so that they behave somewhat like a public service, but it is clear that that simply has not worked.

Across the wider water system, responsibility is divided between organisations, Departments, agencies and authorities, leaving people struggling to find out who will put a problem right. On new year's day last year, families in Warrington had water coming into their homes, and when water is coming through the front door, they do not want an organisational chart; they just want to know what happened and what someone is going to do about it. The system that we have, which has been bolted together over the years, does not reflect how closely all those things connect. That is where we need to change the way we think.

I want to see a publicly owned water company that works holistically across the whole system. A long-term public programme would give businesses certainty about the work coming in. A steady programme of work would give British firms the confidence to invest, take on apprentices,

and develop skills and technology. We must use any change in the ownership model to change the way that the whole water system works, so that it is transparent, puts profits back into the crumbling system and ends the dumping of sewage in our waterways.

The Prime Minister has spoken about stronger public control of essential services, and I welcome that, but in water, public control has to mean more than regulating private companies more closely. We have been doing that since privatisation. Regulation alone cannot decide what the company is ultimately there to do or whose interests should come first. Every one of us depends on water. I believe it should belong to the public and be run for the public good.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I apologise again to the hon. Lady. I call Darren Paffey, I think.

6.29 pm

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): As far as I am aware, Sir Jeremy, you do. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship.

I thank the hundreds of Southampton Itchen constituents who signed the petition because they know that the current model is an abject failure. Trust is completely gone, and they are fed up with being ripped off. My constituents' bills doubled last year. Southern Water has racked up £7 million-worth of fines just this year. It won a record—not a record it wanted—£90 million fine five years ago after sewage poured into the River Test, one of Hampshire's chalk streams. The other chalk stream is the Itchen, from which my constituency takes its name. Rare Atlantic salmon come to spawn in the Itchen, but *E. coli* is rife for people trying to swim there and the stench of sewage is so vile that schools near the river and the treatment works often do not let the kids out on to the playground.

The public agree that the model has failed, not just Labour voters—those of us with a history of being pro-nationalisation—but people across the political spectrum. Some 68% back nationalising water, and support keeps growing. More than three quarters of Conservative voters—though possibly not as many Conservative MPs—want water back in public hands. That is as close to a national consensus as we get, so I understand why so many have signed the petition.

I part company from the petitioners on one point, which has been reflected by several hon. Members: although I agree with the destination, I am traumatised by previous referenda. People are making their voices heard and telling us what they want. We are a Government with a majority; instead of a referendum, we need a plan of the kind that this Government have already shown they can produce.

We did it for rail: a phased, legally underpinned route back to public ownership, transferring operators as contracts expire under a single new body and with no compensation from the taxpayer. I welcome the Prime Minister's vision for greater public control of essential services but reforming a broken model is not the same as ending it. The public see that, so I ask the Minister: please, let us just crack on with it and get water back into public hands.

6.32 pm

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy.

I pay tribute to the campaigners and citizen scientists—some of whom are in the Public Gallery—who have exposed the scale of the sewage scandal. It is only because of them and their campaigning that we are having this debate.

Our water industry is fundamentally broken. I sat with my hon. Friend the Member for Mid and South Pembrokeshire (Henry Tufnell) on the Select Committee and questioned the water bosses, and all we heard was excuse after excuse. We need a fundamental change to protect our failing water infrastructure. That is a top priority for our Labour Government and I welcome the steps that have been made so far to ramp up regulation and get tough on the water companies, but as I will outline, we need to go further.

Nothing enrages the people I represent in Hastings and Rye more than bills going up every year to prop up failing companies, while executives and shareholders try to find ways to evade bonus bans as their companies edge towards bankruptcy. We have already taken important steps, but we must go further to protect vital national infrastructure. In Hastings and Rye, we already see the impacts of the regulation that we introduced: more Environment Agency staff focused full time on monitoring Southern Water, more inspections taking place, and more enforcement notices issued. We are starting to see the results of that work, but there is still more to do. Those of us in the Chamber who favour a co-operative model believe it is the solution that would put people before profit in fixing our broken water industry.

I will talk briefly about the impact of our failing water industry on the people I represent. We have had two major water outages in the past couple of years, one lasting nine days and one five days; there was major flooding in Hastings town centre that ruined people's livelihoods; and 300 million plastic beads washed up on our coastline—we found out that they came from a Southern Water treatment plant only because we got down on our hands and knees and exposed that scandal. Public health has been compromised and sewage is dumped in our sea regularly. Right now a digger sits on the beach in Hastings, an eyesore, because of Southern Water's failings. I believe that the solution is to move to a co-operative model, which would be the radical shake-up that this industry needs.

6.35 pm

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the chair this afternoon, Sir Jeremy.

I want to speak this afternoon about the River Stort, one of the globally significant chalk streams that runs right through my constituency. It is a place where families walk, where anglers spend their weekends, and where countless residents connect with nature. It delivers enormous social, recreational and environmental benefits for our community, but at the start of the month, raw sewage was again discharged into the Stort navigation in a spill that lasted more than eight hours, leaving dead fish and visible pollution in its wake.

I have been requesting a meeting with Thames Water to discuss protecting the Stort since the start of the year, following hundreds of hours of sewage discharges. It has repeatedly failed to engage with that process, only agreeing to meet with me this week after I said that I would effectively turn up at one of its sewage treatment sites to demand an explanation. That is not good enough.

We know that, whatever Thames Water says when I meet it later this week, the truth is that the privatised water industry is failing in its duty of care to our environment, and that privatisation has been a failure. There is simply no other way to put it. We were told that private ownership would drive investment, efficiency and better outcomes, but too often, we have seen the opposite.

As others have said, water is not a luxury; it is an essential public service. We therefore need a system that puts the public interest before shareholder returns, investment before extraction, and environmental protection before corporate profit. To my mind, the only credible path forward is to call time on a failed system and move to a model of public ownership of our water industry. We should start by bringing Thames Water into special administration now. The pollution of our rivers and waterways cannot continue. For the sake of the River Stort, for communities across the country and for future generations, we must take this opportunity to choose a different path.

I am grateful to the Minister for taking the time to meet me earlier this year regarding Thames Water and the River Stort. As I said, I will be meeting Thames Water later this week, so I would be very grateful if she set out in her response what message she would deliver to Thames Water were she in my position, and whether she would consider meeting me again to discuss these repeated failures.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): With gratitude for his patience, I call Lloyd Hatton.

6.37 pm

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): Thank you, Sir Jeremy. As we have heard from many Members today, the privatised model in the water sector has, to put it mildly, completely and utterly broken. For so many of my constituents, this really does feel like the biggest scandal of the 21st century, with water companies continuing to profit while water users and bill payers are left footing the bill for crumbling infrastructure, water shortages and disgusting sewage spills.

It is safe to say that this issue really matters to my constituents in South Dorset. With Chesil beach, Ringstead bay, Lulworth cove, Durdle Door, Old Harry Rocks and Studland, wherever people look across South Dorset, they will find a world-renowned coastline. Of course, South Dorset has been a popular holiday destination for some two centuries now: sailors and windsurfers gravitate to Portland, young families flock to Weymouth and Swanage, and walkers and nature lovers alike regularly make their way across the Isle of Purbeck. Our coastline is central to our lives, and central to our local economy as well.

I suppose my constituents have a simple message for the Minister, and also for the new Prime Minister. First, overhaul the toxic and self-serving corporate culture that has been allowed to permeate the water sector.

[Lloyd Hatton]

Secondly, make it clear that this Government believe that polluting comes with a price. Thirdly, begin that urgent work of reviewing the model of ownership for the water industry.

We must now look at alternative ownership models. Whether that be municipal control, mutuals, not-for-profits, full nationalisation or a Government bond-backed public utility, there are so many options on the table. What my constituents and the tens of thousands of people who have signed this petition have made clear is that they want to see action; they want to see that move to public ownership without further delay.

I look forward to hearing from the Minister in her winding-up remarks, but please can we consider those options? My constituents are clear: they want better value for money, they want a system that protects the environment and public health, and they want to have greater and much more meaningful public control of our water industry. That must be at the core of this Government's work. Then, finally, we can stop the spills.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Gentleman and all Back-Bench speakers for managing a very restrictive time limit.

6.39 pm

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for opening this debate and for his patient and gracious fielding of so many interventions. I express my thanks to Ash Smith and the phenomenal team at Windrush Against Sewage Pollution for bringing this petition before Parliament and for their dedication and commitment to protecting our rivers. I also thank the other campaigners who are in the Gallery; they are passionate and perseverant in their pursuit of cleaner water across our country.

More than 208,000 people signed the petition, including over 600 of my South Cotswolds constituents, which is the ninth most sewage-polluted constituency in the country. Last Saturday, I stood beside the River Coln at Fairford in my constituency with residents who are sick and tired of seeing their river used as a sewer. I spoke with Debbie Campbell, who is in the Gallery and who was most charmingly dressed as a poo emoji. Debbie became a campaigner after swallowing polluted water while open water swimming and ending up doubled over in pain. Her experience is shocking, but sadly the pollution that caused it is no longer exceptional; it has become the norm.

Behind the sewage scandal lies another scandal—what has happened to customers' money? The promise of privatisation was that private capital would bring investments and efficiency, but research from the University of Greenwich estimates that between 1991 and 2023, shareholders extracted around £85 billion more from English water and sewerage companies than they actually contributed in new equity.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): The sewage literally flows outside the King of Prussia in Kingsbridge, and customers have to be really careful when they step

outside it every time we have heavy rain. Does my hon. Friend agree with me and the more than 800 people who signed the petition from my constituency that we have to look again at the water ownership model? It is just not working: bills are going up and up, while shareholders are still extracting money from the water companies rather than it going into upgrading infrastructure.

Dr Savage: I absolutely agree that we need to get upstream of the problem, and I assure her that I always try to step out of pubs carefully.

The supposed justification for private ownership was that investors would bring money into our water system. Instead, over those three decades, vastly more money has flowed out to shareholders than shareholders put in. Money went out, infrastructure deteriorated and debt piled up, and now customers are being told that they must pay to put it right. That is what makes the British public and me so furious. The water companies need to come clean and so does the Government.

Helena Dollimore: Does the hon. Member agree that some of our water companies operate in extremely murky arrangements? Often, there is a complicated network of different companies that sub-contract from each other, meaning that the customer who pays the bill has no idea what value for money, if any, they are getting.

Dr Savage: I absolutely agree—much like our water supply, these arrangements need to be more transparent and stink less.

Ministers have been talking about the forthcoming £104 billion investment programme as though the private sector has suddenly reached into its pockets and found that £104 billion to rescue our crumbling water infrastructure, but it has not. Ofwat has confirmed that that money will come through a mixture of customer bills and yet more borrowing and shareholder equity.

Barry Gardiner: I fully agree with all that the hon. Lady is saying. Does she find it strange that, although we talk about taking tough action against these companies—we talk about Thames Water's £80 million rebate and the more than £100 million fine—it is not the investor who ends up paying that, but we the billpayers? Even then, it is not the companies' investors who suffer; it is us.

Dr Savage: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely good point that I totally agree with.

This is not private enterprise riding to the rescue; it is customers being made to pay yet again for the consequences of corporate failure, and we cannot take our business elsewhere. If I do not like my supermarket, bank or mobile phone provider, I can take my custom elsewhere, but I cannot change from one water company to another unless I physically move house. We are captive customers of a monopoly, which gives water companies an extraordinary responsibility, but they are not living up to it. Too often, we see risks pushed onto customers while the rewards go to investors.

Going back to Fairford, we can see exactly how that plays out in the real world. Fairford sewage treatment works was among the approximately 120 deferred Thames Water investment schemes. Thames Water's former chair told the EFRA Committee that more than £1 billion

was removed from its capital programme to preserve liquidity. In other words, the investment that was needed to protect communities, rivers and nature was postponed because the company needed to shore up its financial position. Now my constituents are living with the consequences.

The analysis of Professor Peter Hammond at WASP records that, at Fairford alone, more than 8,100 hours of sewage spills have flowed into the River Coln since the beginning of 2024. Under the Environment Agency's "heavy rainfall" methodology, only 347 of those hours—just 4.3%—were assessed as compliant. That means that more than 95% of that outflow was not compliant. This is not an occasional emergency measure; it is sustained pollution on an industrial scale.

It is not only an assault on people: rivers are living ecosystems that sustain fish, birds, insects and plants. Pollution strips oxygen from the water and destroys habitats, but nature has no seat in the boardroom and no voice with the regulator. Nature depends on us to speak for it today, and I am doing what I can, as many colleagues have, to speak up on behalf of our waterways. I feel like I have spoken time and time again in this House about sewage, failing infrastructure and Thames Water, yet the sewage keeps flowing, the debts keep mounting and customers keep being asked to pay more. Frankly, they have had enough, and so have I.

I share the petitioners' diagnosis that the present model has failed, but the Lib Dems differ from others on what we believe should happen next. We do not believe, as a number of colleagues have mentioned, that we need to spend a long time waiting for a national referendum to tell us something we already know. The Liberal Democrat answer is mutually owned public benefit water companies that are professionally managed but owned by and accountable to the customers who depend on them, with profits reinvested into the water system rather than extracted for shareholders. For Thames Water in particular, that journey should begin with special administration now. Take on the creditors, restructure the company and bring it out the other side under a fundamentally different ownership model.

Ownership change alone is not enough. The new Clean Water Authority must have the teeth that Ofwat so conspicuously lacked. It must inspect assets, publish open data and require companies to measure what they actually put into our rivers—not just the duration, but the volume and toxicity. I want to see citizen scientists and environmental experts formally represented in water company governance so that somebody is at the table to speak for the river itself.

I would like to ask the Minister for three further commitments: ban bonuses until spills end and leaks are fixed; introduce a three-year cooling-off period before the new regulator can employ people from the industry it regulates; and create a single social tariff so that nobody is priced out of the precious water that they cannot do without. The River Coln flows into the Thames, and the Thames flows past this Parliament. The evidence of the failure of privatisation is literally on our doorstep. The petitioners are right to demand fundamental change: the question at the heart of the debate is not simply whether ownership should be public or private, but who is the water system here to serve?

For too long, customers have paid the bills, carried the risk and lived with the pollution while money flowed elsewhere. Our water system should serve customers, communities and the environment, not shareholders, creditors and bottom lines. I do not want to have to come back to this Chamber to again state the obvious: we have to get upstream of the sewage crisis and change the ownership of the water companies, and change it now.

6.50 pm

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. On behalf of His Majesty's Opposition, I start by offering our sincere condolences to the Prime Minister on the very sad passing of his father. He and his family are in our thoughts and prayers.

I thank the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for opening the debate and congratulate him on his powerful contribution. We heard many powerful contributions from across the House. Normally at this point, as the shadow Minister responding, I would put my lifejacket on, get in a canoe and start paddling round everyone's constituencies. However, so many Members have spoken today that I would use up my entire time allocation by name-checking every one, so I will just thank everyone for their powerful contributions and for speaking on behalf of their constituents to raise issues about the unacceptable behaviour and performance of many of the water companies.

Every family, household or business uses water. We all need it. It is a life-giving, essential resource. We all have an intrinsic interest in water: how much we pay for it, what services we receive, the performance of our local water company, and the sustainability and future of our water supply. The petition we are debating today reached over 208,000 signatures. I thank all those petitioners and the more than 300 people in my Epping Forest constituency who signed it and expressed their clear dissatisfaction with the current state of our water sector.

For too long, customers have seen water companies in the news for the wrong reasons: from awful environmental pollution spills to unacceptable water outages affecting tens of thousands of consumers. In fact, during this summer's extreme heat in August, many thousands of people and properties in my constituency of Epping Forest, including in Loughton, Chigwell, Buckhurst Hill, and Epping, were left completely without water for up to a week, let down by Thames Water because of burst pipes and failing infrastructure.

Vulnerable constituents were left in distress; homes were without water, with people unable to flush their toilets or bathe; parents were left without water to make up bottles for their babies; and livestock owners were panicking over getting water to their animals. Communication and logistics from Thames Water were very poor. Priority service customers were openly saying that they had been told they would not receive any bottled water, despite being priority customers to whom companies have specific duties. As we have heard across the House today, the response by Thames Water in many situations has been wholly unacceptable.

Bottled water was provided in too few locations that were not convenient to get to outside Epping Forest, and those who could get there faced agonisingly long queues in the scorching summer heat. It happened in the hottest week of the year. Other locations that did

[Dr Neil Hudson]

become available in my constituency either ran out of bottled water or were closed early. To add insult to injury, that all took place in the context of the news of Thames Water's new chief financial officer receiving a £1 million welcome package. My constituents and constituents across the country rightly ask how that can be justified when Thames Water failed to provide basic services while bills continue to rise. A staggering hike of a 36% has already been greenlit by the water regulator for 2025 to 2030, and there is more to come following the announcement over the summer.

I know that my constituents and those who have faced water outages across the country would be grateful if the Minister could explain what steps she is taking to ensure that water companies step up to the plate and properly prepare for such crises, so that our constituents are not left in such distressing circumstances again. It is a pleasure to serve opposite the Minister, as I have in a number of debates and Bill Committees, and I know that she is genuinely engaged in this matter. I raised those issues with her over the summer, and I hope she can take it forward and listen to the voices of our constituents in these important matters.

In rural and semi-rural areas, we must not forget that water is also vital for livestock such as farm animals, horses and ponies, and I declare an interest here as a veterinary surgeon. As an illustration, a 500 kg horse needs around 25 litres of water a day—that is not on a hot day—and a lactating dairy cow needs upwards of 100 litres. I assure hon. Members that that is no small amount; that is a lot of bottled water. In these situations, water companies do not step up. It is local communities, livery yard owners and farmers who roll their sleeves up and help each other to get valuable water to these animals. I have raised the issue with the Minister before and I hope that she can take it forward and put pressure on the water companies.

When we get these outages, which are sadly now predictable and will occur, animals as well as people need to be looked out for. We have heard today about the people, and I have highlighted the situation of vulnerable people in my constituency who have not been able to live their lives with their basic needs met, but there are other situations to consider. I urge the Minister to put pressure on water companies when we get outages, as we have seen this summer in my constituency and in many constituencies across the country.

We have frequently debated at the Dispatch Box in this Chamber and the main Chamber the question of people in Kent and Sussex who have had unacceptable water outages from South East Water. I press the Minister once again to explain to the House what steps she and the Government are taking to ensure that a market-based solution can be found for the Thames Water situation.

Daniel Francis: On that point, will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Hudson: I will not give way at this point.

His Majesty's official Opposition have been clear: we are not cheerleaders for this water company, but we do not want to see Thames Water fold. Although the water supply would continue, that would carry the serious risk of higher bills for customers and would not solve all the

issues facing the company. Bizarrely, a few months ago the third party led legal action that could have sunk the company. With them, Reform—strangely their allies on this issue—appear to be happy for the company to go under, exposing taxpayers to billions and pushing consumer water bills sky-high. That is billions of pounds that we as a country simply just cannot afford, as the Government have admitted.

Outages such as the one I described in Epping Forest also highlight the real and present impacts of climate change and increased demand. We have outdated water infrastructure designed to cope with significantly less demand than it is now required to. Changing weather risks more leaks, bursts and breakages. The water outages that tend to follow have knock-on implications for people, schools, businesses and healthcare. It is important to know the economic and social costs of the outages that have occurred over the last few months and years. Will the Minister take this opportunity to provide some reassurance that existing infrastructure is being assessed to prevent leakages or bursts in the first instances and hold water companies to account for that?

The work of the previous Conservative Government in this area means that we now understand the severity of the situation surrounding the performance of water companies in the first place—[*Interruption.*] Hon. Members may laugh but I remind them that, when Labour left office in 2010, only 7% of storm overflows were monitored. The previous Government worked proactively to increase that percentage: by the end of 2023, it had increased to 100%. It went from 7% to 100%.

This is basic science: it is only when something is measured and vital data is collected that the extent of the problem can be seen. It was the Conservative Government that started that, and that started to put in place measures to address the situation—something they, and indeed the new Labour Government, have found to be complex and not easy to solve.

Sean Woodcock: Will the hon. Member give way?

Dr Hudson: I am not giving way. [*Interruption.*] I am just giving hon. Members some facts about where the problems—

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman has made it perfectly clear he is not giving way. All points of view in this debate must be heard, and heard respectfully. If the shadow Minister is not giving way, there is little point in continuing to bob unless he changes his mind.

Dr Hudson: Furthermore, the previous Conservative Government's landmark Environment Act 2021 introduced significant changes to how water quality is managed and monitored in England and Wales. The Act mandates enhanced reporting, monitoring and treatment compliance measures from businesses. It also establishes long-term goals to limit pollution and protect natural water resources from wider range of potential pollutants.

I am sure that, in considering what action the current Government have taken, the Minister will cite the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025—I was on the Bill Committee shadowing her, and I really appreciated her constructive work. It is encouraging to see the current Government adopt some of the measures the previous Government

had already introduced, such as banning water company bonuses for bosses if the company had committed serious criminal breaches that damaged the environment. However, it was disappointing that they failed to support the constructive amendments the Opposition tabled, including to ringfence funding from enforcement fines for bespoke water restoration funds; to guarantee that companies fix the environmental damage they cause locally; to require Ofwat to create rules on financial reporting in its remuneration and governance rules; to reduce consumer bills if companies were hit with enforcement fines; and to ensure that companies do not leverage too much debt. Those were sensible, constructive amendments that the Government voted down.

Indeed, there is a recurring pattern of the current Government attempting to claim credit for measures introduced by the previous Government. The current Government have repeatedly claimed to have secured £104 billion of investment in the water system, but £93 billion of that had already been submitted by water companies in October 2023—under the previous Government.

The Independent Water Commission published its final report in July 2025. It was a comprehensive document containing 88 recommendations. Since then, the Government published their water White Paper in January 2026. In May 2026, the King's Speech included the promise of a clean water Bill. Given that there has been a change in Prime Minister since then, I would appreciate clarity from the Minister about whether the Government plan to proceed with special administration orders for water companies such as Thames Water, as was first suggested. Furthermore, are they going to do that as bespoke individual actions or as part of a nationalisation programme? Will that form part of a clean water Bill? Can she confirm when we will see that clean water Bill come before Parliament?

A well-functioning, properly regulated water system is achievable if there is the political will to make it happen. The public want change, as has been proved by the petition today. His Majesty's official Opposition are ready to work constructively with the Government on ensuring that that is done for the benefit of people right across the country.

7.4 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I offer my sympathy to the Prime Minister on the loss of his father. Losing a parent hurts, whatever age you are. I thank my hon. Friends and other hon. Members for being so kind when I lost my own dad earlier in the year. Thanks, everybody.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for securing this important debate. He cares deeply about this issue, as do so many members of the public—many more, I imagine, than the 208,000 people who signed the petition.

I pay tribute to all the citizen scientists, environmental groups, campaigners and Members of Parliament from across the House. I particularly mention Julie and Reuben; I hope I am not giving too much away when I say to Julie how deeply moved both I and the previous Secretary of State—my right hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Emma Reynolds)—were after we met her, and how

touched and privileged we felt to be presented with one of Heather's shells as a reminder of the need to campaign on this. I promised her that we would focus much more on public health. We have generally lost that focus, and one of the key things in all the reforms we are trying to make is putting public health back at the heart of water. That is why we created the water system to begin with—for public health—and it should be focusing on that right now.

All the failures that hon. Members mentioned—all the people who have become sick and the impact on places that people love—are outrageous. They talked about the places where they used to paddle but cannot now, and places they used to visit. It is horrific that we have ended up in this situation.

I have always wanted to introduce a water Bill that meets the political moment and the public appetite for change. I am delighted that it feels that we are closer to that. The change in Prime Minister has opened up options that were previously not available; as I will mention, more things are suddenly on the table. I apologise in advance for being an irritating politician—we can quote that one—who is not going to give specific answers, but that is honestly because we are working through things right now. We are working through things across Government, and are looking to introduce a Bill that meets that appetite for change.

Hon. Members have had many key messages. As the shadow spokesman, the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson), mentioned, I would normally respond to everyone. I apologise that I am not going to do that, because too many spoke. However, I hope hon. Members recognise that I have been a very open Member of Parliament. We received a parliamentary question from an Opposition Member asking how many meetings Ministers have had with Back-Bench MPs. I have done 141.

Barry Gardiner: First, I reassure my hon. Friend that she is not an irritating Minister at all; I think she is generally held to be a very good Minister. Can I tempt her to enlarge slightly on what she said? When we talk about an SAR, people say, "Let's start with Thames Water—it is the obvious one to start with." Might the reason for the Minister's hesitation to elaborate be that the Government are now looking much more holistically at what could be done with the whole water sector?

Emma Hardy: We are looking at all of the sector and what can be done right across it. The Prime Minister has been absolutely clear, in all the comments he has made, that, in his words, the current water sector is "a leaking monument" to a system that prioritises private over public. He has used similar words on a number of occasions.

I completely understand why people are asking fundamental questions about ownership. For too long, pollution, poor performance and financial instability in the water industry have left customers and communities to pay the price. Infrastructure is crumbling, as we see with water outages. Lots of hon. Members mentioned national security, water and resilience. How can we meet the changing climate when we have a system that is so ineffective? I want to move towards a better system, in which we are thinking about the management of water in a catchment—about water, flooding, wetlands and nature, and how we can do all that together.

[Emma Hardy]

To do that, we need significant reform to give people and places greater control and to make the industry work for them again. Believe it or not—I know that nobody here would question it—there are some who question whether climate change is real. It is real, everyone. Just remember what it was like in summer. Our water industry must be fit for climate change of the future, delivering clean waterways, reliable services and fair and predictable bills.

Whatever the ownership model, we face a challenge around ageing infrastructure. We need major investment. The provision of basic services and the prevention of sewage spills is a fundamental requirement of the sector. Some 30 years of privatisation has not left the system in a good state, and that is probably an understatement. I want to create a system that protects customers, improves the environment and secures reliable water services for the future.

There is no single easy fix, but the Prime Minister has been very clear that the failures of the past cannot continue. We will look at all possible solutions for the water industry and bring forward reforms to make the sector work for people and places again. As the Prime Minister has said, later in the year our 10-year plan for Britain will set out plans for stronger public control over essentials such as water.

I will not pretend that there is one simple answer to the problems facing the sector, but what is not in question is the need for significant reform. That means tougher regulation, which we have started to see through the increased inspections by the Environment Agency, the court cases coming through and the fines it is starting to issue. We have that tougher regulation, but we still need greater enforcement, greater financial resilience and absolutely a stronger voice for customers and communities. Many hon. Members talked about democratic voice, which I agree is missing from the water sector. Yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and I had a quick conversation about how we need to bring people's voices and that accountability back into place. I know that the Prime Minister is completely committed to looking at devolution and at how organisations can be responsive and answerable to place.

Bathing water sites are prioritised for upgrades. The hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) is no longer in her place, but I know that she and I share a love of pre-pipe solutions, which is looking at nature, wetlands and how we can create spaces for water to go to prevent it from entering the system. On looking at assets, we have introduced MOT tests, which has uncovered more problems. When people first go in to inspect, they will identify different problems, and we are seeing that.

I want to pick up on a point made by one hon. Member—I apologise; I did not write down their name—about the trade unions and the workers. We can never forget that the workers on the frontline are not responsible for the failures of the water companies. I have absolute respect for them. I meet with the trade unions on a regular basis, and one thing they mention is the abuse that workers get when they are out working. They are not responsible—in fact, I would say that the workers

out there on the frontline are the ones holding these companies together. I pay wholehearted tribute to the trade unionists and workers in all those water companies, who are doing a great job in incredibly difficult situations.

I completely agree that the system is not fair at the moment. We need to look at rain water management. England's drinking water is world-leading. There are many things where we can say there is failure, but our drinking water quality is incredibly high. On referendums, my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) mentioned that he was scarred by a previous referendum, the result of which I still feel deeply myself. But I think we know what the public think about this sector.

The Prime Minister has been clear that the Government's priorities must be the public's priorities. People want more ownership and control over the things that matter most to them. Public trust in the sector has been damaged by pollution, financial difficulties at some companies and a failure to invest sufficiently in infrastructure. Channel 4's "Dirty Business" further highlighted the public concern about sewage pollution, shining a light on issues that matter to communities.

Public interest should be at the heart of how our critical services operate. For decades, the essential services that underpin daily life, including water, have suffered from over-privatisation, leading to high costs to the public. The Government are clear that the public have a right to expect those services to be affordable and accountable. We have established a public control taskforce that will rewire the state, examining how public control across sectors, including water, can be utilised to return them to public service and bring down costs for families. That ambition is reflected in the reforms we are already taking forward: strengthening accountability, improving performance, giving customers and communities a stronger voice, and ensuring that the water sector works in the public interest. We know that bold action is needed, and that is why we are fundamentally reforming the water sector.

I conclude by thanking the campaigners, the 208,000 people and everyone involved in working together on this issue. I hope we can all unite and push forward together to build the water system that we need for our communities, for our environment and for our public health.

7.15 pm

Paul Davies: I start by thanking not just Ash for the petition, but the many campaigners who have worked so hard and tirelessly on this issue. You have made sure that there is no hiding place for the water companies, and that is the most important thing; this is out in the open and it is clearly understood by the public. We know that the public view the model as completely broken and are demanding significant change. I know that you will keep the work going, and you need to keep it going because you need to keep all of us on our toes and pin us down to make sure that we deliver as well.

I thank all hon. Members. There has been a clear consensus across the House that the model is broken. There are some nuances in terms of views on the solutions, but the starting point is clearly that the privatised model does not work. If we go back to 1989, the architect of the model, Margaret Thatcher, told Members

not to pontificate and to look in the “light of the facts”. Well, I think we have all looked in the light of the facts. We know where we are. We know that we need to make that change.

I said in my speech that the Government have to be brave, and I say it again. We have to be brave. There are clearly many issues on the road to public ownership, but that does not mean that we give up at the first hurdle. We have a direction that many of us have talked about, and we have to find solutions and ways to overcome those obstacles and make this a reality. Again, I give many thanks to Ash and everybody else, and to all the Members who contributed to the discussion.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman and to everyone who has spoken. I also thank those in the Public Gallery for attending this evening. I know some of you had to be patient to wait for a seat, so thank you for that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 762640 relating to a referendum on public ownership of the water sector.

7.17 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 14 September 2026

BUSINESS, INNOVATION, SCIENCE AND TRADE

Speciality Steel UK

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade (Blair McDougall): I wish to update the House on the position regarding Speciality Steel UK.

SSUK entered liquidation in August 2025, with the independent, court-appointed official receiver managing the liquidation process. Throughout this period, the Government have provided funding to enable the official receiver to carry out his statutory duties, including maintaining site safety, supporting employees and conducting a sales process for the business and its assets.

For more than 12 months, the Government have worked hard to facilitate a private-sector solution, funding the official receiver's process while interested parties engaged in the sale process.

As part of that process, the official receiver engaged with a number of interested parties seeking to acquire the business and its assets. The final bidder taken forward by the official receiver subsequently sought Government support associated with its proposed acquisition of SSUK. Following extensive engagement with the bidder and its advisers, and detailed consideration of that request, the Government have concluded that they cannot provide support on the terms proposed.

This decision has not been taken lightly. The Government carefully examined the proposal and explored whether an arrangement could be reached that appropriately protected public money while providing a sustainable basis for the future of the business. Despite extensive engagement, material concerns remained regarding the evidence supporting the proposed financing package and the protections available to taxpayers.

The Government's decision relates specifically to the proposal for Government support that was presented. It should not be interpreted as a broader judgement on the bidder or its wider business activities.

SSUK occupies a unique place in the UK steel ecosystem. Its specialist capabilities have potential applications in advanced manufacturing sectors, including aerospace and defence, while its sites are major employers in communities facing significant economic challenges.

The Government also recognise the significance of the SSUK sites to the employees, local economy and communities it supports. Given the size and complexity of these sites, an official receiver-led closure process could materially reduce future options and create significant uncertainty for workers, communities and local stakeholders.

The communities surrounding SSUK have already suffered a prolonged period of uncertainty. The Government cannot accept the prospect of a prolonged process that will restrict HMG's aim to create the growth opportunities this area deserves, especially while viable

future options remain available for consideration. We are determined to ensure that decisions about the future of SSUK are taken in a way that protects local communities, preserves opportunity and supports economic growth.

The Government will therefore engage with the official receiver's sale process and develop a proposal for the public acquisition of SSUK. This approach will help preserve control of the sites and maintain strategic optionality while decisions are taken on their longer-term future.

Public acquisition is not an endpoint and does not pre-judge the outcome of this work. It will create the space for a detailed assessment of a sustainable future for SSUK as a speciality steelmaker, regeneration of the sites, or a combination of the two.

The Government will engage closely with local communities, elected representatives, the mayor and relevant experts to determine the most appropriate future for the business and its sites.

All future decisions and spending commitments will be subject to detailed due diligence and funded from existing Government budgets.

The Government will continue to keep the House informed of significant developments.

[HCWS341]

Pubs Code and Pubs Code Adjudicator: Statutory Review

The Minister for the Future of Work (Kate Dearden): In line with the Government's regulatory action plan, which seeks to ensure the UK's regulatory system is targeted, proportionate and supports growth, I am today publishing and laying before Parliament the report on the third statutory review of the pubs code and Pubs Code Adjudicator.

The Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015 provided for the establishment of the pubs code to regulate the relationship between large pub-owning businesses and their tied tenants in England and Wales. The pubs code is found in the Pubs Code etc. Regulations 2016. It governs the relationship between large pub-owning businesses, who have estates of 500 or more tied pubs in England and Wales, and their tied pub tenants.

The code is based on the principles that tied tenants should be treated fairly and that they should not be worse off than they would be if they were free of their tie. The code includes a range of rights and protections for tied tenants in their commercial dealings with their pub-owning business—POB—related to their fair and lawful treatment. The code also gives tenants the right, at certain times, to exercise a market rent only—MRO—option, to change from a tied tenancy to a free-of-tie tenancy, where the rent is set at the market level and the tenant is able to buy products on the open market.

The Act requires the Secretary of State to appoint a Pubs Code Adjudicator. The role of the PCA is to enforce the code and to encourage and monitor compliance with its requirements. The PCA can also give advice and guidance, investigate non-compliance with the code, enforce the code where non-compliance is found and arbitrate disputes under the code. Where the PCA finds non-compliance, it can require the publication of information, impose financial penalties or make recommendations.

The Act requires the Secretary of State to review the following every three years: the operation of the pubs code, the performance of the PCA, and the regulations setting the PCA's costs, fees and financial penalties. This statutory review covers the period from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2025 and draws on publicly available evidence and data published in the Government's pubs code post-implementation review. It also includes stakeholder views from the Government's 12-week call for input, which was published on 22 May 2025 and received 36 responses.

This third review found the code to be operating consistently with the two overarching principles set out in the Act: the fair and lawful dealing by pub-owning businesses in relation to their tied pub tenants; and tied tenants not being worse off than they would be if they were not subject to any product or service tie.

While there have been improvements in the professionalisation of support available to tied tenants, the review found that there is some concern with tenants' ability to access the existing MRO gateways. The review also found that POBs believed MRO hindered their ability to invest and plan for the future of their business.

The Government will therefore develop proposals with stakeholders to introduce additional MRO gateways and further opt-out provisions, with the aim of further strengthening the effectiveness of the pubs code.

With regard to the PCA, the review found the PCA has been broadly effective in enforcing the code over the review period, with particular success in reducing arbitration cases and successfully completing the first investigation under the code. The review however notes that there are areas for improvement. While the Secretary of State does not believe he needs to issue new guidance under the Act, the Government encourage the PCA to act on six areas identified in this statutory review to further improve its effectiveness. As the PCA has now been in existence for over a decade and the current PCA is reaching the end of her second term, the Government will also consider commissioning an independent review of how it protects tied tenants' rights and fair treatment under the code.

The review further found that no changes were necessary to the related code and PCA fees, costs and penalties as set out in the Pubs Code (Fees, Costs and Financial Penalties) Regulations 2016.

The report on the third statutory review of the pubs code and PCA has today been placed in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament.

[HCWS339]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Information Commissioner's Office: Transition to Information Commission

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): Today I am pleased to announce that on 30 of September 2026, the Information Commission will take over all the functions and responsibilities of the Information Commissioner's Office to become the UK's independent data protection regulator.

This marks an important milestone in the modernisation of the UK's data protection regulator. In an increasingly data-driven economy, the regulator sits at the heart of the UK's data and digital landscape, playing a vital role in maintaining public trust, upholding high standards of data protection, and ensuring personal data is used responsibly to deliver economic and social benefits.

The transition to the Information Commission is designed to ensure that the regulator is equipped to meet future challenges and seize opportunities. The ICO currently operates as a corporation sole, with powers and responsibilities vested in one individual, the Information Commissioner. From 30 September, those functions will transfer to the Information Commission, a body corporate with non-executive and executive members, and with collective responsibility for decision making.

This change has purpose and value. The new governance model will bring together a broader range of skills, experience and perspectives at the top of the organisation, strengthening accountability, resilience and decision making, and ensure that the regulator is well placed to navigate rapid technological change, increasingly complex data-driven services, and evolving public expectations around transparency and accountability.

The Data (Use and Access) Act 2025 (Commencement No. 9 and Transitional and Saving Provisions) Regulations 2026

To give effect to the transition, the Government have made regulations commencing, on 30 September, the sections of the Data (Use and Access) Act 2025 that abolish the Information Commissioner's Office and transfer all its regulatory and other functions to the new Information Commission. In July, the Government announced the appointment of seven new non-executive members to the Information Commission: Laurie Benson, Maggie Carver, Stephen Cohen, Sukhvinder Kaur-Stubbs, Gary Kildare, Hilary Newiss and Scott McPherson. Together with the interim chief executive, Paul Arnold, they will assume their roles on 30 September and lead the organisation into its next chapter.

The new board brings expertise from across business, technology, regulation, governance and public service. It will help shape the commission's strategic direction, support delivery of its ambitious agenda, and ensure the organisation remains focused on serving in the public interest.

Above all, this transition represents a new beginning for the regulator. The Information Commission must be an organisation that people trust, and trust starts with strong leadership, clear accountability and the right culture. The new governance structure provides strong foundations for an organisation that is open, accountable and resilient, capable of regulating with rigour and independence while building public confidence in the responsible use of data for years to come.

I congratulate all the newly appointed members on their roles. The Government have also launched a public appointments campaign to recruit a new chair of the Information Commission, who will play a vital role in shaping its future direction and ensuring its success.

[HCWS337]

EDUCATION

School Food Standards

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Paul Waugh): The Government today have published their formal response to the consultation on proposals to improve the school food standards in England.

Ensuring children have access to healthy and nutritious food at school is an important part of giving every child the best start in life. School food plays a vital role in supporting children's health, wellbeing and readiness to learn. Yet too many children are not getting the nutritious food they need: children consume around twice the recommended amount of free sugars, over 90% consume insufficient fibre, and almost one in four children leave primary school living with obesity. Dental decay remains the leading cause of hospital admissions for five to nine-year-olds. Since the school food standards were last updated, nutritional evidence has evolved. The Government therefore launched a consultation on updating the standards for the first time in over a decade, with the aim of improving the nutritional quality of food and drink provided in schools and supporting healthier eating habits for children and young people.

The consultation ran from April to June 2026 and received 5,216 responses from parents, pupils, schools, caterers, local authorities, health professionals and representative organisations, alongside wider engagement across the education, health, catering, faith, farming and food sectors. Respondents were generally supportive of improving the nutritional quality of school food, particularly proposals to increase fibre, fruit and vegetables, strengthen drinks standards, introduce dedicated breakfast standards and improve school food governance and transparency. They also raised important considerations around affordability, implementation, meal uptake and inclusion. These views have helped to shape the Government's final decisions and implementation approach.

Having carefully considered the consultation responses, the Government will proceed with many of the proposed reforms, while taking into account stakeholder feedback on the practicalities of implementation. The revised school food standards will strengthen the nutritional quality of food and drink provided in schools by placing greater emphasis on fruit, vegetables, fibre and a wider range of healthy protein sources, while reducing sugar and further restricting foods high in saturated fat, sugar and salt. For the first time, dedicated breakfast standards will ensure that food and drink provided before the school day supports a healthier, lower-sugar and higher-fibre offer. The revised standards will also strengthen requirements relating to fruit and vegetables, fibre, protein and healthier drinks, while maintaining access to free drinking water throughout the school day. Some requirements affecting secondary schools, including changes relating to drinks, cheese and pulses, will be introduced on a phased basis to support deliverability and pupil acceptance.

Reflecting the views expressed during the consultation, the Government have refined some of the proposals to support effective delivery. These changes include greater flexibility in how vegetables can be incorporated into meals, adjustments to fibre requirements and wholegrain provision, limited flexibility for processed meat in secondary

schools, and the retention of up to two sweetened desserts or baked products each week in secondary settings. The Government have also broadened the range of permitted products in several areas, including plant-based options and drinks, while retaining the overall ambition of improving children's diets and supporting healthier eating habits.

The Government intend to lay regulations in October 2026, alongside the publication of supporting guidance. During autumn 2026, we will work with schools, caterers and sector partners to co-develop practical implementation materials and ensure that stakeholders across the supply chain are supported to understand and prepare for the revised requirements. This collaborative approach will help ensure that the guidance and supporting resources are practical, deliverable and responsive to operational challenges.

Most of the revised school food standards will come into force from September 2027, providing schools, trusts, caterers, suppliers and local authorities with time to prepare for implementation. A limited number of secondary school requirements, including specified changes relating to drinks, cheese and pulses, will be introduced from September 2028 following a transition period. This phased approach reflects consultation feedback on deliverability, pupil acceptance and meal uptake, while supporting practical implementation across secondary settings.

Alongside the revised standards, the Government will introduce a new national compliance framework from September 2027. This will include strengthening governance and transparency around school food, by expecting every school to appoint a lead governor for school food, and to publish their menus and school food policies online. We will also take forward the development of a national monitoring system on school food. This will form part of a wider package of resources, training and guidance accessible to all schools.

This work sits alongside other measures to ensure children have access to healthy, balanced food. We are rolling out free breakfast clubs in every state-funded school with primary aged pupils in England. We have extended free school meals to all children from households in receipt of universal credit, providing over half a million children from disadvantaged backgrounds with access to a free, nutritious meal every school day, and lifting 100,000 children out of poverty. Together, these measures represent the largest expansion of school food provision in a generation, helping to improve attainment, behaviour and outcomes by ensuring more children have access to nutritious food throughout the school day.

We continue to work alongside the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs as it develops a new food strategy to ensure the food on children's plates is good quality, accessible and affordable, as well as sourced locally where possible.

Taken together, these reforms will support healthier food provision across the school day and help ensure that children are well nourished, ready to learn and able to thrive.

A copy of the Government response will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Covid-19 Inquiry Module 3 Report: Government Response

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Yvette Cooper): On Thursday 19 March 2026, the covid-19 inquiry published its third report, which focused on the impact of the pandemic on the healthcare systems of the UK and put forward 10 recommendations for the Government to consider. Today, the Government are publishing their response to the report, and setting out the actions we are taking to address its recommendations.

The covid-19 pandemic was one of the most significant public health challenges in recent history, placing extraordinary demands on health and care services and affecting people and communities across the United Kingdom.

Many thousands lost loved ones, often in deeply distressing circumstances, and our thoughts remain with all those affected. We also continue to pay tribute to the health and social care workers across the country who served the public with extraordinary dedication, compassion, and courage in the most challenging of conditions.

The Government are grateful to Baroness Hallett and the UK covid-19 inquiry team for their continued efforts to ensure that we learn all the necessary lessons from this crisis, and we are grateful as well to all those frontline workers and bereaved families who shared often harrowing evidence of their experiences with the inquiry.

The module 3 report is a sobering and important account of the impact of the pandemic on healthcare systems across the UK. It recognises both the extraordinary efforts of frontline staff and the profound pressures under which they worked.

It also shows how the pandemic exposed significant vulnerabilities in our health and care systems, including long-standing weaknesses in staffing, capacity and infrastructure, and it sets out the consequences that these had for patient care during a national emergency.

It is vital that the lessons from those failings continue to be learned and embedded to strengthen the future resilience of our health and care systems.

In many areas, that action is already under way. Our 10-year health plan sets out a long-term vision to make the NHS fit for the future, delivering better, faster care, with a workforce that is more empowered, flexible and fulfilled. We are also bringing forward legislation through the Health Bill which is integral to our modernisation agenda to improve patient care, system co-ordination and accountability.

Most importantly, alongside these reforms, our new pandemic preparedness strategy shows how the UK will build on the specific lessons from covid-19, and ensure we are better ready and able to deal with pandemics in the future.

Our response to the module 3 report takes this work further and sets out the actions we are taking to strengthen preparedness for future health emergencies. These include improving infection prevention and control governance, strengthening visiting rights, modernising health data

systems through the single patient record and strengthening psychological, emotional and occupational health support for the health and care workforce.

We recognise that meaningful change will require partnership working across all the nations of the United Kingdom, the NHS, local government, and the wider health and care sector. We are committed to working closely with our partners to ensure that the lessons of this report are fully embedded at every level, and in every region. We will continue to work on these issues to turn the lessons identified in the report into lasting change and ensure the country is better prepared for future threats.

While the module 3 report is focused on healthcare systems, teams across health and social care have worked together to strengthen joint working between the two systems, so that people experience more integrated and person-centred care.

The upcoming module 6 report will consider social care in more detail, and those findings will be carefully taken into account as the Government develop their plans for a national care service, and ensure that the social care system in our country gives people the dignity, support and security they deserve.

We owe it to all those who suffered during the pandemic, and all those who served on the frontline of that health crisis, to ensure that the failings of the past have been properly acknowledged and addressed, and that a stronger, more resilient health and care system will be built for the future.

[HCWS342]

JUSTICE

Standard of Proof for Unlawful Killing Consultation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): Today, the Ministry of Justice is launching a public consultation on the standard of proof to be applied to the short-form inquest conclusion of unlawful killing.

This consultation follows the publication on 23 October 2025 of the independent police accountability rapid review, as announced by the Home Secretary in her written ministerial statement which can be found on the UK Parliament website under the number UIN HCWS987.

Commissioned in October 2024 by the then Lord Chancellor and Home Secretary, the review was conducted by Tim Godwin OBE QPM and the right hon. Sir Adrian Fulford, and examined two issues: the threshold for police misconduct proceedings involving use of force, and the standard of proof for unlawful killing inquests.

The Home Secretary accepted the recommendation to revise the threshold for police misconduct proceedings involving the use of force, and amendments to the Police (Conduct) Regulations 2020 were laid on 9 June and came into force on 30 June.

On the issue of the standard of proof for unlawful killing inquest conclusions, the review found a strong case for a return to the criminal standard (i.e. beyond reasonable doubt) reversing the effect of the Supreme Court's 2020 Maughan judgment, which applied the civil standard (i.e. balance of probabilities) to all short-form conclusions. However, the reviewers also recognised

that this issue has broader implications beyond policing, including in healthcare, detention, and workplace settings and that its own engagement was necessarily limited. The review therefore recommended that the Government should undertake a full public consultation before deciding whether to legislate for a change. The Lord Chancellor has accepted this recommendation.

Accordingly, the consultation launched today seeks views from across sectors and communities on whether the current standard remains appropriate. It does not propose a change, nor does it assume that one will be made. The aim is to gather evidence and perspectives to inform future policy development, ensuring that any decision is grounded in transparency, fairness, and public confidence.

The consultation will run for twelve weeks, closing on 7 December 2026, and is available at: <https://consult.justice.gov.uk/digital-communications/standard-of-proof-for-the-short-form-inquest-concl/>

I encourage all those with an interest in the coronial system, public accountability, and access to justice to engage with this important consultation.

For clarity, the issue considered in this consultation relates only to the short-form conclusion of unlawful killing in the coronial jurisdiction. It is not connected with the Government's recent decision to exclude criminal offences related to unlawful killing such as manslaughter or death by dangerous driving from the Sentencing Act's progression model.

[HCWS340]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Robert Hamill Inquiry Report

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Bryant): I am today laying before Parliament the report of the Robert Hamill inquiry, and publishing it in full online.

I acknowledge the significant delay of 15 years between the completion and publication of this report. While necessary to allow legal proceedings to conclude, this prolonged wait has undoubtedly caused Robert's family deep anguish. I offer my profound sympathies to his family and pay tribute to their dignity throughout this ordeal.

On 27 April 1997, Robert Hamill was violently attacked by a large crowd in Portadown simply because he was a Catholic, dying from his injuries weeks later. His murder was a horrifying tragedy.

The inquiry addressed two primary public concerns regarding the conduct of the Royal Ulster Constabulary: first, whether officers in a nearby Land Rover were responsible for Robert Hamill's death; and secondly, whether the subsequent investigation was inhibited by wrongful acts or omissions.

The inquiry concluded that officers in the Land Rover were not guilty of any wrongful act or omission directly facilitating the death, though Sir Edwin Jowitt expressed a dissenting view. However, the inquiry made stark findings regarding wrongful omissions during the initial police investigation between 27 April and 7 May 1997, concluding that these omissions severely hindered the investigation.

These omissions included:

- Failure to carry out initial debriefings at the scene or at the police station, which was negligent and severely impacted the murder investigation;

- failure to carry out a full debriefing once it became clear Robert Hamill's injuries were life threatening;

- wrongful omissions by two officers to supply relevant information regarding an individual seen at the scene, which was negligent in one case and deliberate in the other.

Furthermore, the inquiry found that RUC officer Robert Atkinson committed a deliberate wrongful act by tipping off a suspect, resulting in the destruction of evidence, and subsequently conspired to cover up the call, leading to his conviction for conspiring to pervert the course of justice.

The Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland will reflect on these findings. The Government remain committed to establishing effective mechanisms that deliver transparency and accountability for legacy cases.

I place on record my gratitude to the current and former chairs and panel members—Sir John Evans, the late Sir Edwin Jowitt, and Reverend Baroness Richardson—for their diligent service in uncovering the truth. Copies of the report have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS343]

Petitions

Monday 14 September 2026

OBSERVATIONS

CABINET OFFICE

Political Donations and Public Contracts

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that companies which donate to political parties have gone on to receive billions of pounds in public contracts; and further declares that this creates a perception that political decisions are shaped by cosy relationships with super-rich donors, instead of a sole focus on delivering better living standards and services for millions of people.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ban political donors from receiving public contracts with Governments of political parties they have donated to.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Neil Duncan-Jordan, *Official Report*, 14 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 900.]

[P003226]

Observations from the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mark Ferguson): This Government take concerns regarding the integrity of public procurement very seriously. We are committed to maintaining the highest standards of transparency and impartiality in the award of all public contracts.

Public procurement is governed by a legislative framework that requires that contract award decisions are made solely on the basis of objective commercial criteria, including value for money, quality, and capability. The legislation is designed to ensure fair, open, and transparent competition, and it requires all public authorities to manage conflicts of interest robustly throughout the procurement life cycle.

The Procurement Act 2023, which came into effect in 2025, has strengthened the rules for contracting authorities on managing conflicts of interest. The Act requires contracting authorities to identify and keep under review actual and potential conflicts of interest. As a result, commercial teams across the public sector have been taking steps to improve their approach to identifying and mitigating any conflicts of interest. We have published guidance and templates to support this.

For conflicts of interest that may exist within suppliers, the Government's supplier code of conduct makes clear that we expect suppliers to mitigate appropriately against any real, potential or perceived conflict of interest.

Furthermore, civil servants and Ministers are bound by codes of conduct that require the disclosure and management of potential conflicts of interest to ensure that personal or political associations do not bias decision-making.

The Government are clear that political donations should never influence the award of Government contracts. Contracting authorities can exclude a supplier for a broad range of misconduct and offences, such as bribery, breach of contract and poor performance. Exclusion grounds also cover situations where a supplier has acted

improperly during the procurement process, resulting in an unfair advantage in relation to the award of a public contract.

Exclusion decisions are dealt with on a case-by-case basis and are procurement-specific; suppliers may also be added to a central debarment list by the Cabinet Office. If a supplier is placed on the debarment list they may or must not be awarded public contracts, depending on the seriousness of the misconduct or offence. We will not hesitate to make use of those powers where there is evidence of wrongdoing.

We are committed to delivering the highest level of transparency regarding public spending. All significant Government contract awards are published online, allowing for scrutiny of how public money is spent, with transparency notices mandated for direct awards and contract performance.

This Government are ensuring that procurement decisions are made on merit, free from favouritism, so that the public can have full confidence that every contract is awarded fairly, transparently, and in the best interests of the public.

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT Crystal Palace National Sports Centre

The petition of residents of the constituency of Beckenham and Penge,

Declares that the Crystal Palace National Sports Centre is a nationally significant sporting and community facility; further declares that plans have been submitted to transform the site, including refurbishment of the Grade II listed building, a revamped Olympic-sized pool and athletics stadium and new multi-sport and parasport facilities; and further declares that this transformation would benefit residents of Beckenham and Penge for generations to come.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to work with the Mayor of London and other relevant partners to support the delivery of the transformation of the Crystal Palace National Sports Centre.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Liam Conlon, *Official Report*, 14 July 2026; Vol. 901, c. 789.]

[P003227]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): This Government recognise the important heritage of this iconic sporting venue, and the immense value it has to local residents and people in the wider south London area. That is why we welcome the recent decision by Bromley council to approve the regeneration of this important sporting hub.

The Government are committed to ensuring that everyone, regardless of background, should have access to and benefit from quality sport and physical activity facilities, which are great spaces for people of all ages to stay fit and healthy and play an important role within communities.

The responsibility for this venue lies with the Greater London Authority. That said, the Government are committed to supporting the provision of grassroots sports facilities and to working with local leaders to understand what communities need and welcomes the commitment to renovate this facility.

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**not later than
Monday 21 September 2026**

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