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DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 16 April 2024

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: I have a short announcement to make regarding the implementation of recommendations made by the Procedure Committee in its report, "Correcting the record", which the House agreed to on 24 October.

Hansard has now made the necessary changes to enable all Members to submit written corrections to the *Official Report* when they have made errors of fact in their contributions. When such corrections are published, a footnote will appear in the print version of *Hansard*, with hyperlinks in the online version that will direct the reader to the original content. The same will apply to corrections made via points of order and in written ministerial statements. In accordance with the Committee's recommendation, a central corrections page, listing all corrections in chronological order and updated weekly, will be published on Parliament's website.

Further information can be found on ParliNet, or by consulting the Hansard managing editors.

Oral Answers to Questions

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

The Secretary of State was asked—

Floating Offshore Wind

1. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support floating offshore wind projects in the Celtic sea. [902273]

14. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What plans she has to support floating offshore wind farms. [902287]

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Claire Coutinho): Britain is a pioneer of floating offshore wind. We are working with the Crown Estate to lease 4.5 GW of seabed capacity for floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea, and we are supporting emerging technologies with a separate funding pot in allocation round 6.

Selaine Saxby: The White Cross project in the Celtic sea has a cable due to come ashore in my constituency, and it advises me that it is unable to agree compensation to businesses disrupted by these works due to a lack of Government guidance. Will my right hon. Friend meet me—and, ideally, come to see where the project is due to make landfall—to find an alternative cable route, and if not, will she ensure that White Cross is in a position to fully compensate the businesses that will be hugely impacted if the planned cable route proceeds?

Claire Coutinho: I thank my hon. Friend, who is a doughty campaigner for floating offshore wind. I am unable to comment on any specific concerns about a particular planning decision, but I am sure the relevant Minister will be happy to meet her to discuss how the Government can provide better guidance on compensation. People whose land is acquired compulsorily should not be left worse off financially, and compensation should be offered in line with the statutory compensation code.

Sir Desmond Swayne: What assistance can be had for those fast-growing enterprises principally reliant on equity?

Claire Coutinho: I thank my right hon. Friend for a typically pithy question. We are doing an enormous amount to support the landscape for investments in this country that rely on equity, whether that is through full capital expensing, or, in my area of responsibility, the green industries growth accelerator.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I am sure the Secretary of State will agree that much of Britain's energy needs could be met, and generated, offshore. Alongside floating wind power, we also have the opportunity to take advantage of tidal and marine power. Does she recognise that Britain has the second largest tidal range in the world after Canada, yet we use so little of it? To put that right, will she agree to meet me, other colleagues in this House and the northern tidal power gateway to look at how we can gain green, renewable, secure British energy from Morecambe bay?

Claire Coutinho: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I have been following tidal power for many years, and he is right to point out that the UK has both a strong record in renewables and an interesting geological landscape for new renewable technologies. We have dedicated £105 million—our biggest ever budget—to the flow of emerging technologies through AR6, but I would be delighted to meet him to discuss his work further.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her response. There is always a competition. As I represent Strangford, the fishing sector is very important to me. It is important that we have floating offshore wind projects, but also to ensure that fishing can be sustainable. In these discussions, can she confirm that the interests of the fishing industry and representation from the fishing industry are given appropriate weight, taking into consideration the need for sustainable fishing to continue? Without fishing my people will lose jobs.

Claire Coutinho: I thank the hon. Gentleman. We are passionate supporters of the fishing industry. We continue to have conversations with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to ensure that we share our marine bed in an equitable way, not only getting the most out of it for our clean energy needs but protecting the fishing industry.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I am sure the Secretary of State does not want a repeat on her watch of the failure of allocation round 5, when her Department managed to crash the offshore wind market.

However, the industry is already warning that the parameters set for floating wind in the next round, AR6, could mean that only one sub-gigawatt project succeeds in getting contract for difference support: way off the Government's recently trumpeted target of 5 GW of floating offshore by 2030. What steps is she taking to ensure that we do not see another failure and lose the global race for this emerging technology?

Claire Coutinho: If people want to ensure that we win the global race for renewable technology, they should, frankly, vote Conservative. Under the Conservatives, world-leading mechanisms have been introduced. The only country that has built more offshore wind capacity than the UK is China. We have an enormous and very successful track record, and continue to work with industry to ensure that AR6 will be a success.

Dr Whitehead: I am not sure that answer gives much reassurance to industry or this House. The truth is that uprating our port infrastructure is critical for deploying floating offshore wind and for reaching a zero carbon power system, but Government support is so inadequate that they are funding only two ports, dropping viable projects on the way, when, according to the floating offshore wind taskforce, to reach floating offshore wind ambitions we need infrastructure upgraded in at least 11 ports. Is this not another example of the Government failing to invest for the future and failing to back British industry?

Claire Coutinho: The only failure on renewable energy is the record Labour left when they were in power, when 7% of our electricity was generated from renewables whereas now that figure is 50%. On ports, not only have we got our world-leading freeport agenda but we have put forward projects such as FLOWMIS—the floating offshore wind manufacturing investment scheme—which is also helping to build our port infrastructure.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): With 17 GW of floating offshore wind planned to be anchored within 100 nautical miles of Aberdeen, what steps will the Secretary of State take to ensure that technological and engineering knowledge and wherewithal and supply chain investment are also anchored within 100 miles of the north-east of Scotland?

Claire Coutinho: We are doing an enormous amount of work on supply chains. We have put forward our £1 billion green industries growth accelerator fund to support British supply chains, and we are also taking steps to attract investment into this country to build British business. All of that will be positive for the Scottish offshore wind sector.

Fuel Poverty: Winter 2023-24

2. **Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab):** What estimate she has made of the number of households that were in fuel poverty in winter 2023-24. [902274]

24. **Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab):** What estimate she has made of the number of households that were in fuel poverty in winter 2023-24. [902297]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): As previously stated, fuel poverty is devolved. Statistics for England estimate that there were 3.17 million households in fuel poverty in 2023, over 1.5 million fewer than in 2010.

Mary Glendon: April's new price cap will see 6 million households across the UK in fuel poverty and National Energy Action estimates this figure will include 8,800 households in North Tyneside alone. The Government promised their household upgrading scheme would help 100,000 households but in nine months it has helped fewer than 5,000 and only 15 in my constituency. Can the Minister account for the abysmal failure of the flagship policy?

Amanda Solloway: I stand by the Government's record of support on fuel poverty: we have helped with affordability and with insulation and energy efficiency. We have given unprecedented support to 350,000 households, who were kept out of fuel poverty at the energy peak in 2022.

Ian Lavery: Electricity standing charges for people in the north-east are 71.2p per day while those in the south pay 40.79p per day. Can the Minister explain why the people in the north-east, the area experiencing the highest levels of fuel poverty in the country, are paying 75% more than those in other regions simply for the privilege of being connected to the grid?

Amanda Solloway: The hon. Gentleman makes a reasonable point on standing charges, which is one reason why we have urged Ofgem to gather information on them. We have had over 30,000 responses and will be looking at this in due course.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): In the Office for National Statistics and House of Commons data, fuel poverty in England was 13.5% back in 1996. It rose to 22% by 2010 and, as has already been mentioned, it fell back to 13% in 2023. Does the Minister agree that that shows that Conservatives deliver energy policy with environmental and economic good sense and have done a lot better than the last Labour Government?

Amanda Solloway: As I said, we are incredibly proud of our record on heading towards net zero and ensuring energy security so that never to have to go through the cost of living crisis that we have recently gone through.

Large Solar Farms: National Grid

3. **Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con):** If she will make an assessment of the ability of the National Grid to connect to large solar farms in (a) 2024 and (b) 2029. [902275]

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Justin Tomlinson): Network companies are expected to deliver connections by the date stipulated in customer connection agreements. Reforms to accelerate the connection process and build times for transmission infrastructure will help to ensure that expectation is met.

Richard Fuller: May I welcome the Minister to his new responsibilities and urge him to focus on this particular issue? According to a recent report by the UK Sustainable Investment and Finance Association,

44% of investors in solar power say there are problems getting interconnections with the grid. We know there are issues in the distribution network, which means that the transmission network is probably the only place that large-scale utility solar farms can connect, and people are worried that only particular parts of that network accept contracts. Will the Minister look at that in detail, because there are major concerns in my constituency that there will be connections at Eaton Socon power station, which is one of the few places where contracts are being offered?

Justin Tomlinson: That is absolutely understood. As set out in the spring Budget, the Government are working with Ofgem and network companies to release more network capacity and to prevent speculative projects from obtaining and retaining network capacity. That, alongside faster network infrastructure delivery, should result in more capacity across the country and help to reduce any clustering of generation projects.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): National grid infrastructure is critical to the delivery and connection of these solar farms, as it is for onshore and offshore wind. The importance and urgency of that was stressed by the Winser review of August last year. The Government have got until 2030 to deliver this policy. Will the Minister update us on the transmission acceleration action plan?

Justin Tomlinson: The hon. Member is spot on. We are proud to have gone from 7% renewable energy to 47%. To go further, we must hit those ambitious targets by unlocking additional investment. For example, through the accelerating strategic transmission investment process, we anticipate unlocking a further £198 billion of investment by 2030. Alongside the changes I have already set out, that will be key to getting that extra power generated through solar.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Surely it is not an adequate justification for building solar farms on 10,000 acres within a six-mile radius that Gainsborough is close to the national grid serving the old power stations. Is that not gross overdevelopment on good arable land, and should the inspector not take account of this overdevelopment?

Justin Tomlinson: I understand my right hon. Friend's raising this point. That is why it is clear in planning policy and guidance that solar projects should be directed to previously developed or non-greenfield land. That was the message we reinforced in the January national planning statement to ensure that we reduce unnecessary clustering.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): May I also welcome the Minister to his new role? According to National Grid, £58 billion of investment is needed to meet our 2035 decarbonising target. British electricity demand is expected to rise by 64% in the next 10 years, and the current system is still designed around electricity sources of the past, such as coal. New cables need to be built to bring electricity from renewable energy sources, as we have already heard. What assessment has the Department made of the impact this problem is having on green investment?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Member for her kind words. I enjoyed working with her on many occasions in my former roles. The Government have continued to work with the public and business to unlock additional investment. For example, through the connections action plan, we expect an additional 40 GW of accelerated collection dates to be released, which will particularly help in the area of solar. We are also looking at the £85 billion of investment we have unlocked since the autumn statement through the transmission acceleration action plan. Those are all vital components to hit our ambitious targets.

Net Zero Targets: Business and Investors

4. **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with businesses and investors on the Government's net zero targets. [902276]

12. **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with businesses and investors on the Government's net zero targets. [902285]

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Justin Tomlinson): As a Department, our ministerial team meet regularly with industry: for example, through the hydrogen investor forum, the Offshore Wind Industry Council, the solar taskforce, the Green Jobs Delivery Group and the cross-cutting Net Zero Council, which is shortly celebrating its first anniversary.

Bill Esterson: Car makers warned what would happen before the Government delayed the end date for the sale of new petrol and diesel cars. Sure enough, sales of new electric cars are down by 19% in the latest figures from the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders. Switching to electric driving is cheaper over the lifetime of the vehicle. Why did the Government not listen to the warnings from business? Do they not want people to benefit from cheaper travel?

Justin Tomlinson: I proudly drive an electric vehicle myself, and I celebrated the fact that 48,388 electric vehicles were registered in March 2024 alone.

Mohammad Yasin: Eight in 10 of the large energy companies recently surveyed by the UK Sustainable Investment and Finance Association agreed that the UK is falling behind in the race to become the most investable market for low-carbon technologies. What steps will the Minister take to reassure the clean energy industry that the UK is serious about the transition to net zero, which must include moving away from a commitment to max out oil and gas production?

Justin Tomlinson: I very much welcome the hon. Member's highlighting the importance of this area. I am sure that he will join me in celebrating the fact that we secured £60 billion of investment in low-carbon technology in 2023, up a staggering 71% on the previous year. We are heading in the right direction to meet our ambitious target.

Dame Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Does the Minister agree that it is economic madness to pursue our current ruthless net zero agenda, outsourcing carbon production to the likes of China and forcing us to pay more to heat our homes and power our economy? We must put the British taxpayer first.

Justin Tomlinson: It is crucial that we work with the public and businesses, not against them. In “Powering up Britain” we set out our plan to secure our energy system by ensuring a resilient and reliable supply, increasing our energy efficiency and, crucially—my hon. Friend will welcome this—bringing down bills.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Zero Carbon Humber projects are a vital part of the country’s achieving its net zero target. However, there is concern among potential investors—particularly in connection with the carbon cluster projects—that the Government are moving a little too slowly. Will the Minister reassure those businesses that the timetable will be honoured?

Justin Tomlinson: My hon. Friend regularly champions investment in his constituency, working closely alongside the businesses he supports. We understand the importance of that. Just before Christmas, we set out a road map to speed up the process, which we very much hope will unlock that vital investment for his community.

Mr Speaker: We come to the shadow Minister.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to his post. I think he is struggling a little bit to get with the programme, but hopefully he will soon be on message. [HON. MEMBERS: “Oh!”] That was in terms of his answer to the question about being anti-net zero.

The Department confirmed last month that curtailment payments cost a whopping £1.4 billion last year. That is bill payers’ money being used to pay providers to switch off wind power and switch on gas. Why should people be paying even more on their energy bills to switch off cleaner and cheaper energy because the Government have failed to deliver the net zero capacity that we need?

Justin Tomlinson: That is why we have been focusing on expanding the interconnectors network so that, where we produce energy that we cannot use domestically, it can be sold. I also welcome last year’s large-scale expansion of battery farms—they have been springing up at an amazing speed—which allow us to store the energy supplied that exceeds demand.

Kerry McCarthy: I look forward to hearing the Minister’s predictions of what the curtailment payments will be in the coming year, because they were up for the previous year. In a survey of energy industry leaders, nearly 90% said that we need new policies to make the UK more attractive to investors. Nearly two thirds are moving investment out of the UK, and three quarters blame a lack of clarity from this Government on net zero. Is it not time for Ministers and Back Benchers to drop the culture war and put British industry and jobs first?

Justin Tomlinson: On a lack of clarity, I think the shadow Minister has mixed things up with the green prosperity plan. Even I cannot keep up with the latest position of senior figures in the Labour party, but I think the shadow team lost that battle. The reality is that in 2023 we secured £60 billion of private investment in low carbon technology, which was up a staggering 71% on the previous year. That is a credit to our team who delivered that.

Rooftop Solar Panel

5. **Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** What steps she is taking to encourage the installation of rooftop solar panels. [902277]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): The Government recently consulted on the future homes and buildings standards, which explore how we can drive on-site renewable electricity generation, such as solar panels, in new homes and buildings. In December we simplified planning processes for larger rooftop installations by removing the 1 MW cap for non-domestic arrays in permitted development rights.

Mr Hollobone: The CPRE’s rooftop solar campaign calls for far greater emphasis on the installation of solar panels on our nation’s rooftops, rather than the promotion of ground-mounted solar on greenfield and agricultural land, which harms our natural environment and imperils UK food security. Would the Minister be kind enough to read the CPRE’s “Lighting the way” report, which highlights international best practice on this issue?

Andrew Bowie: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and his recommended reading. I was aware of the CPRE’s rooftop campaign, and I am keen to understand the findings of its latest report. As set out in the British energy security strategy and the energy security plan, we are aiming for 70 GW of solar capacity by 2035. That would be more than quadruple our current installed capacity. We need to maximise the deployment of both types of solar to achieve that ambition.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): This is my first chance to offer my condolences to you, Mr Speaker, on the death of your dad. He was a great man and helped induct me into this place when I first came here in 1979.

If we are to have a proper domestic solar roll-out across, we desperately need more trained people in the green sector. What will the Minister do about that? Is it not about time that every university and further education college offered apprenticeships and ways in to these wonderful jobs? Will he talk to industry leaders, such as Octopus, about their shortage of skilled men and women?

Andrew Bowie: Absolutely. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State regularly meets companies such as Octopus. Through our green jobs delivery plan we are enticing more people into the jobs of the future, to help deliver our ambitious targets. It is interesting to note that Labour’s plans would halve the number of apprenticeships for those jobs in the UK, should it ever get into power.

Onshore Wind Planning Applications

6. **Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op):** What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on trends in the number of onshore wind planning applications. [902279]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): In 2023, 80 onshore wind planning applications were submitted in Great Britain—a 27% increase from 2022. We have recently changed planning policy in England to pave the way for more onshore wind projects where there is local support.

Gareth Thomas: It is now seven months since the Government claimed to have lifted the onshore wind ban. The Secretary of State at the time claimed that her decision would speed up the delivery of projects. Since then, no new applications for onshore wind farms for domestic use have been submitted. Does the Minister think that that has been a success?

Andrew Bowie: Unlike the Opposition, we like to work with and listen to communities around the country. We believe in local consent for projects. It should be up to local communities to decide whether and how much onshore wind they want in their area. The Opposition do not like to talk about this, but we must remember that in 2010, a pitiful 7% of electricity came from renewables—that is up to 50% under this Government.

Solar Farms: Impact on Local Communities

7. **James Gray** (North Wiltshire) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of solar farms on local communities. [902280]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): As with any new development, solar projects may impact communities. The planning system considers all perspectives when balancing local impacts with national need. It is important that local areas benefit from hosting net zero infrastructure. Many developers already offer community benefit packages.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): If the Minister had wanted to see the impact that a massive solar farm, such as the so-called Lime Down carbuncle in my constituency, will have on local people, he should have come to Malmesbury town hall last week, where 750 people were protesting against this appalling plan in North Wiltshire. It is going to be 2,000 acres of panels, 3 million panels, 5,000 acres blighted, and 30 miles to the nearest connection down at Melksham. It is an absolutely disgraceful proposal. It comes at a time when Wiltshire has eight out of 10 of the largest solar farms. We already have enough, vastly exceeding our county target for solar production. Will the Minister consider the cumulative effect of all these solar farms? Will he ask the National Infrastructure Commission to take into account the cumulative effect of solar farms when considering such applications?

Andrew Bowie: I very much thank my hon. Friend for that question. He raises a very interesting topic, and one that we are listening to. The project he speaks to is at the pre-application stage. An application is expected to be submitted to the Planning Inspectorate between January and March 2025. Due to my quasi-judicial role in determining applications for development consent, it is not appropriate to comment on any specific matters. I am aware that some of his constituents are coming to Parliament this Thursday and I will be happy to meet them to discuss their concerns.

Decarbonisation: Off-grid Properties

8. **Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What steps she is taking to support off-grid properties to decarbonise. [902281]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): The Government offer grants of £7,500 to those wanting to install a heat pump, or £5,000 to install a biomass boiler, under the boiler upgrade scheme. Support for energy efficiency upgrades and low-carbon heat is also available through our help to heat schemes.

Steve Double: Cornwall has a very large number of off-grid properties. One way they can decarbonise their heating is through the use of renewable liquid heating fuel. Last year, the Government said there would be a consultation on promoting and supporting the use of that fuel in the coming months. However, in response to a recent written question it was suggested that it would not be launched until at least September this year. Will the Government bring forward the consultation as soon as possible, so we can help people to decarbonise through the use of renewable fuels?

Amanda Solloway: The Government recognise the potential for renewable liquid fuels to play a role in decarbonising heat where heat pumps are unsuitable, and we are working at pace to develop a consultation that will explore that role in more detail. We will be issuing a consultation in September, in line with commitments made by Ministers during parliamentary debates on the Energy Act 2023.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): I support the cause of the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double). The transition to hydrotreated vegetable oil is far cheaper than heat pumps; we are talking about a conversion that be done in an hour for about £500. I urge the Government to proceed on that with haste.

Amanda Solloway: It is important to note that we are taking this matter incredibly seriously. We are also providing funding to tackle fuel poverty and reduce carbon emissions through the energy company obligation, the home upgrade grant and the social housing decarbonisation fund.

Nuclear Energy Capacity

9. **Chris Clarkson** (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): What steps she is taking to increase nuclear energy capacity. [902282]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): The historic nuclear road map that I announced in January reconfirmed the Government's ambition to deploy up to 24 GW of nuclear power by 2050. The road map sets out plans to make investment decisions concerning 3 GW to 7 GW every five years between 2030 and 2040.

Chris Clarkson: Nuclear is essential not just for our economy but for our national security. A truly sovereign supply does not just mean commissioning new reactors but increasing our skills base, so I welcome the £750 million invested in that. What steps is the Department taking to ensure that people in communities such as Heywood and Middleton can access that skills funding, so they can take advantage of high-skilled, well-paid jobs in the sector?

Andrew Bowie: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He is a doughty champion in this area—indeed, he should be with Atom Valley in his constituency. As he references, last month the Prime Minister announced significant investment in developing the nuclear skills pipeline, helping the sector to fill 40,000 new jobs by the end of the decade, including supporting plans to double the number of nuclear apprentices and quadruple the number of specialist sites and nuclear fission PhDs.

Green Technologies: Investment

10. **Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): What steps she is taking to help increase investment in green technologies. [902283]

22. **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): What steps she is taking to help increase investment in green technologies. [902295]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): The UK has already made tremendous progress in securing investment in green technologies. Recent figures indicate that the UK saw £60 billion of investment in 2023, meaning that since 2010 the UK has seen £300 billion of public and private investment in low-carbon sectors. As a Department, the ministerial team and I meet regularly with investors, such as through our second hydrogen investor forum event and regular roundtables to understand how we can better encourage investment.

Stephen Crabb: It is true that the UK has a remarkable track record of winning investment in green technology, but given that other countries are now proceeding apace with their own green investment plans, does my hon. Friend agree that if we can show that we have effective policies for speeding up planning consents for energy projects and expanding grid capacity at a far faster rate, and if we can fix our contracts for difference regime, we shall be able to demonstrate to investors once again that this is the very best place in which to invest in such technology?

Andrew Bowie: My right hon. Friend is right: we have a proud record of investment in green and clean technologies, and in many respects we are leading the world in that regard. Last year we launched our Giga project and this year we are launching CfD allocation round 6, which is the stand-out leader when it comes to enticing investors—but of course we can go faster and further, and where we can we will. That is why I am so pleased to see the work that is being done within my Department and, indeed, with industry with the aim of doing just that.

Alexander Stafford: Given that there is no more important technology in the UK's green industries than hydrogen, I was pleased to note that, after much dilly-dallying, the Department had listened to my continued advocacy of hydrogen blending in pipes. I look forward to seeing its plans imminently, but what support is it giving to home appliance providers who want to take advantage of the benefits of hydrogen to create hydrogen-ready technology that can be used for both blended and fully hydrogen-powered appliances?

Andrew Bowie: My hon. Friend is another doughty champion for one of the expanding sectors in which we are investing: his championing of the hydrogen industry in this country is unmatched. I should be happy to meet him to discuss how we can progress further and speed up investment in hydrogen, which will be key to securing the progress of so many of our ambitious projects.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), I co-chaired the all-party parliamentary group on green deal mis-selling. After nearly 10 years, we are still waiting for justice for our constituents who were told to invest in green technologies for their homes. A legal process is under way, but it is very lengthy. Most of our affected constituents were over 70 when all this happened, and some were over 80.

There must be a political solution. Numerous Prime Ministers and Secretaries of State have agreed that what happened to our constituents was dreadful, so why do they not find a solution that will encourage other people to feel confident that they too can invest in green technologies in the knowledge that the Government have their backs should it go wrong?

Andrew Bowie: I agree with the hon. Lady that what happened was dreadful. As she has said, an ongoing legal process is under way so I am restricted in what I can say at the Dispatch Box, but I should be happy to meet her in the coming days to discuss the specifics involving her constituents who were affected.

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): The south-west is proud to be punching above its weight in green technology, and will soon welcome a £4 billion gigafactory at the Gravity site near Bridgwater which will create 4,000 new jobs and boost the green economy. Investment in infrastructure around the country is needed if we are to see more developments of that kind, so what steps is the Department planning to facilitate such ventures?

Andrew Bowie: It is fantastic to hear Liberal Democrats champion Conservative policies that are bringing investment and new jobs into the country—for that is what happens under a Conservative Government—and it is great that a gigafactory is planned for the south-west. As a result of Giga and so many of the other projects and funds launched by the Department, we expect to see many more such developments, but of course there is work to be done: we can go further and faster, and, as I have said, where we can we will. I look forward to working with the hon. Lady in further championing the UK as the destination of choice for all who want to invest in these new technologies.

Grid Decarbonisation: Cost

11. **Mr Louie French** (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): What recent estimate she has made of the cost of decarbonising the grid by (a) 2030 and (b) 2035. [902284]

23. **Philip Dunne** (Ludlow) (Con): What recent estimate she has made of the cost of decarbonising the grid by (a) 2030 and (b) 2035. [902296]

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Claire Coutinho): Our plans to decarbonise the grid by 2035 are ambitious but achievable, and have been assessed as realistic by the Climate Change Committee. They will build on the UK's achievement in becoming the first major economy to have halved emissions. According to independent analysis, securing a net zero grid by 2030 would cost taxpayers £116 billion, and it would mean a "made in China" transition.

Mr French: The Conservatives have a strong track record of promoting renewables, and this Government are supporting British companies and supply chains through programmes such as Giga with funding which now stands at more than £1 billion. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Labour's unaffordable and unrealistic plans to achieve a net zero grid by 2030 will not give British supply chains time to grow, as well as meaning the "made in China" transition to which she has referred?

Claire Coutinho: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Only recently, we have seen European countries having to wean themselves off Russian oil and gas. We cannot do that, only to become dependent on other parts of the world for our energy needs. Our plan will give British supply chains time to develop, ensuring that British workers can reap the benefits of the energy transition. According to expert analysis, the Labour plans will cost taxpayers £100 billion—all to undermine British manufacturing and risk blackouts.

Philip Dunne: As the Secretary of State is aware, the Environmental Audit Committee inquiry into decarbonising the economy has heard evidence that no newly commissioned nuclear capacity—even from small modular reactors—is able to come on stream until 2035. New energy projects given planning consent today are unlikely to connect to the grid before 2030, and the scale of the necessary grid network roll-out to reach our 2035 target is already huge. What does my right hon. Friend make of the feasibility, let alone the cost that she has highlighted today, of the fantasy pipe dream of official Labour party policy to decarbonise by 2030?

Claire Coutinho: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. The plans that we have set out represent the largest expansion of nuclear in 70 years, with radical reforms to the grid. However, it does take time to build things. Labour's 2030 policy is mad, bad and downright dangerous. I have yet to meet a serious expert or a single person in the industry who believes it is possible. We have a record to be proud of, becoming the first major economy to halve our emissions, but Labour's plans would heap costs on to taxpayers, in stark contrast to our pragmatic and proportionate approach.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): If grid decarbonisation by 2030 really did cost the billions of pounds that the Secretary of State claims, she might care to explain why her own policy is to achieve 95% of full decarbonisation by the very same date. She knows that independent analysis actually says that Labour's plan would reduce families' energy bills by £300 a year, so will she 'fess up? Will she admit that the true price of her failure will be paid for by hard-pressed families in their energy bills?

Claire Coutinho: I would completely reject that, based on the many conversations that I have had with industry and experts. The plans that we have set out have been assessed by the Climate Change Committee as being realistic. The plans that the Labour party has set out have been criticised by pretty much every single part of the energy system. Rather than playing politics with this issue, the hon. Gentleman should consider the reality of the taxes, the raised bills and the problems with the economy that Labour's plans would force on Britain.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): Last year, the Government promised that they would publish their decarbonisation plan by the end of 2023, but they have failed to do so. Is that because the Secretary of State is too embarrassed to admit the truth? She is way off track, even for delivering clean power by 2035, because she has bungled the offshore wind auction, is failing on energy efficiency and refuses to end the onshore wind ban. Is it not the case that she wants to attack Labour's plan because she cannot defend her own?

Claire Coutinho: I thank the hon. Lady, but that is an extraordinary question. There would be much more credibility from the Labour party if it would recognise that the UK is the first country in the G20—the 20 largest economies—to halve emissions. While Labour Members might play politics with this issue, I am absolutely happy to defend our position on dealing with our climate change obligations in a pragmatic way that protects household finances.

Public Ownership of the Energy System

13. **Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab):** Whether she has made an assessment of the potential merits of public ownership of the energy system. [902286]

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Justin Tomlinson): Properly regulated markets, which incentivise private capital to invest in the energy system, provide the best outcome for consumers and promote market competition as the best driver of efficiency, innovation and value.

Nadia Whittome: Despite the Minister's disagreement, public ownership exists in our energy system. For example, 45% of our offshore wind assets are publicly owned, just not by the UK—they belong to the state-owned companies of countries such as Denmark and Norway. Publicly owned energy companies can accelerate the transition to clean energy while creating jobs, reducing bills and ensuring that the public benefit directly from our common resources. Countries that are leading the transition to renewables have realised this; when will the Minister?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Member. It is flattering: I am 48 hours into my role, and she would like to upgrade it so that I can personally be in charge of delivering energy companies. I gently remind her that in her own local authority of Nottingham City Council, Robin Hood Energy, which was chaired by a politician—the public probably want fewer, not more, of us—managed to cost taxpayers a staggering £38 million.

LNG Emissions: Impact of Oil and Gas Licences

15. **Tom Hunt** (Ipswich) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the number of oil and gas licences issued by her Department on the level of carbon emissions from imported liquefied natural gas. [902288]

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Justin Tomlinson):

North Sea Transition Authority analysis shows that producing natural gas domestically is almost four times cleaner than importing liquefied natural gas from abroad. Without continued licensing, our dependence on imported oil and gas, including LNG, will only increase more quickly in the future.

Tom Hunt: I have always been a fan of us fully exploiting our natural resources. We have got to take a pragmatic route to cutting our carbon emissions, but at the forefront of our thinking must also be driving down energy costs, boosting energy security and not doing anything that enfeebles our country on the global stage. Does the Minister agree that this is the right approach in terms of energy costs and that not importing as much liquefied natural gas will also make our carbon footprint smaller?

Justin Tomlinson: I completely agree with my hon. Friend's analysis. Utilising our own domestic resources is just common sense when the alternative is to import more fuels from abroad. It would be an act of self-sabotage to put restrictions on our own domestic sector, damaging jobs and investment only to liquefy and ship gas from halfway around the world and create more emissions in the process.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I welcome the Minister to his post, but he will know that most of our gas imports are not LNG and that they actually come via a pipeline from Norway, where gas production is half as polluting as it is in the UK. New oil and gas would not only be disastrous for our climate; it would also fail to boost energy security. Following the welcome announcement that the UK will finally withdraw from the energy charter treaty, will the Government also reverse their decision to license the Rosebank oil field, which will cost the climate and the public purse extremely dear?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Member for her kind comments. While we scale up our clean energy success, including in renewables, which have gone from 7% to 40%, there is still a need for oil and gas. A failure to issue a new licence would make no difference to the consumption of oil and gas, but it would increase imports, which typically have higher emissions, and also damage our economy.

Offshore Energy Grids

16. **Dr Dan Poulter** (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): Whether she plans to support offshore energy grids. [902289]

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Justin Tomlinson): Offshore transmission is central to the Government's balanced approach to delivering an electricity network fit for net zero.

Dr Poulter: The Minister will be aware of the Norwich to Tilbury pylon proposals, which will put 50-metre pylons through swathes of the Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex countryside. He will also be aware that the recent electricity system operator review indicated that it will soon be cost-neutral to have an offshore option for that same energy transition, and that multiple points for connecting offshore wind turbines to the grid are facing planning problems. Will he do what he can to engage with National Grid and get it to do the right thing and look at a cost-neutral option of offshore transmission, rather than the current onshore proposal?

Justin Tomlinson: My hon. Friend has a long-standing record of making powerful suggestions on behalf of his constituents and neighbouring constituencies on this important issue. The ESO's recent study considered a total of a nine alternative options for transmission routes in East Anglia, including three predominantly offshore options and two hybrid onshore and offshore options. It is important that we try to work with communities.

Topical Questions

T1. [902306] **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Claire Coutinho): I would first like to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), who served this Government for eight years, including as Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero since 2022. He will be missed in the role for his expertise. He attended his first COP in 2005 and was instrumental in our achievements at COP28 last year. He helped the UK to halve its emissions, which is an extraordinary achievement. We are the first major economy to do so. He also worked with the Net Zero Council, protecting families through the global energy crisis and backing 200,000 British oil and gas workers. He leaves a legacy of which he can be very proud. I would also like to welcome the Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), a tireless campaigner who I know will continue this Government's world-leading work.

Since I last updated the House, families are benefiting from a drop in the energy price cap worth almost £250 a year to the average household. I have set out plans to reform tariffs, saving bill payers up to £900 a year, and invested £750 million in nuclear skills as part of my plans for the largest expansion of nuclear in 70 years.

Greg Smith: The consultation on renewable liquid fuels from September is welcome, but the recent survey by the Future Ready Fuel campaign showed that 88% of respondents from off-grid households actively want the option of switching to a renewable liquid fuel. Will my right hon. Friend work with me to ensure that we can get consumers the choices that they actually want, and not the heat pumps that many do not?

Claire Coutinho: I thank my hon. Friend. I know that he is a fantastic champion for people living off the gas grid. We are supporting off-grid homes to transition to heat pumps or biomass boilers through the boiler upgrade scheme, with grants of up to £7,500. Renewable fuels

such as hydrotreated vegetable oil have the potential to play an important role in heating off-grid buildings, and we will be issuing a consultation on that role by September, in line with commitments made by Ministers during the passage of the Energy Act 2023.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the shadow Secretary of State.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): Mr Speaker, can I start by paying tribute to your father, Doug? He was a remarkable fighter for social justice, and we share your sense of loss.

A year ago, after presiding over the absolute scandal of the forced installation of prepayment meters, the right hon. Lady's predecessor promised full compensation for anyone affected. Unbelievably, she has left it to the energy companies to decide who gets compensation and how much. They have assessed 150,000 people and just 1,500 got anything—99% got nothing. Why has she so catastrophically failed to deliver justice for those affected by the PPM scandal?

Claire Coutinho: The right hon. Gentleman does actually raise an important issue. We have gripped the question of prepayment meters since the scandal first emerged. Not only have we made it clear that the horrors that we saw last winter, of people forcing prepayment meters on vulnerable households, should not take place, but I have been in contact with Ofgem in recent days about making sure that people can get the compensation they deserve at the speed with which they need it.

Edward Miliband: That is simply not good enough. It is a year on. The right hon. Lady is the Energy Secretary; she should be delivering that compensation to people, and she is failing across the board. The onshore wind ban remains; the offshore wind market crashes; the insulation schemes are a disaster, while she spends her time appeasing the flat-earth, anti-net zero brigade in her own party. No wonder the former Energy Minister, the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) resigned. Is it not the truth that the Secretary of State is failing in her job and the British people are paying the price?

Claire Coutinho: The right hon. Gentleman did not listen to my previous answer. It was this Government who worked with Ofgem to make sure that forced prepayment meter installation stopped taking place for vulnerable households. We have said very clearly that it is abhorrent, and we do not want to see it again. On compensation, we are working with Ofgem.

However, if the right hon. Gentleman talks about the wider energy plans—and we should do that—I think that he should consider the recent comments from industry that Labour's plans would leave the country uninvestable, that they would hike the bills that people would pay, and that they would cost so much in needed taxes—over £100 billion of costs for Labour's mad plans to decarbonise the grid by 2030, which, let me be clear, are not backed by industry, the unions or consumers.

T4. [902309] **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): We have seen the price of fuel go up at the pumps because of what has happened in Ukraine, but, in this country, we have also seen that there is great variety at different

petrol stations. I am really pleased that the Competition and Markets Authority has looked into it and that the Government are coming forward with Pumpwatch. We have seen something similar in Australia that saves up to £50 for the individual. Can we make sure that, when this comes into play, the Government have an advertising campaign so that the public know that they will be able to see local prices, up to date every 30 minutes, for the best place to get their fuel?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): We will publish the Government's response to the recent Pumpwatch consultation as soon as possible, and we continue to work closely with the Competition and Markets Authority, and the sector technology companies, to launch Pumpwatch this year. Of course, my hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point that, when we launch this, we will of course make sure that everybody knows about this valuable resource.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): We learned last year that no fewer than 200 Department for Energy Security and Net Zero jobs were going to transfer from London to Aberdeen. That was championed by no less than the Secretary of State for Scotland, the right hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) and the Minister responsible for nuclear and renewables, the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie). It now transpires that only 35 jobs will transfer to Aberdeen. For context, that is 0.37% of the DESNZ workforce. Is the Secretary of State content for that derisory transfer of jobs from her Department to Aberdeen? Presumably she will not be, so what is she going to do about it to give the north-east of Scotland a better deal?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue. We are very proud—I am particularly proud—that we have announced Aberdeen as our second headquarters. Hosting our second headquarters underlines the importance of the north-east of Scotland in our net zero transition. Unlike the Scottish National party, we champion the north-east of Scotland. They are anti-exploration, anti-new licences and anti-oil and gas. The headquarters already has more than 100 staff, and our ambition is for more than 135 by March 2027. I have been doing some research, though: it turns out that the Scottish Government—his party's Government—have a grand total of zero jobs in his own constituency of Angus.

T9. [902314] **Simon Jupp** (East Devon) (Con): Residents in Cranbrook and Tithebarn have faced frequent energy outages and woeful customer service from E.ON's district heating networks. The Government's Energy Act 2023 means that district heating networks will finally be properly regulated. Will my right hon. Friend outline when this regulation will be brought in?

Amanda Solloway: The initial phase of heat network regulation, including transparency rules, will come into force in 2025. Some requirements, such as pricing regulation and guaranteed performance standards, require more market data and will be introduced in the second-phase regulation in 2026.

T2. [902307] **Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Does the Minister acknowledge that the alarming delays in track 1 carbon capture and storage expansion and track 2 timelines endanger the Humber's status as a global leader in hydrogen and CCS, endanger £15 billion of private investment and jeopardise industrial decarbonisation and economic growth?

Claire Coutinho: We recognise the role that CCS can play for the economy not just in the Humber but across the wider British economy, which is why we have set out £20 billion of investment committed to this sector. We set out an ambitious road map just before Christmas, and we continue to meet investors to see how we can speed up the process.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I have been speaking to my constituents about the whole net zero agenda. Although the people of Romford are very determined to see cleaner and greener energy sources, I have to say that their priority is energy security, energy self-sufficiency and energy sovereignty. I am worried that we are not taking the people with us on net zero, because many people simply cannot afford this extreme agenda that could end up giving China a competitive advantage and bankrupting our own country.

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind Members that these are topical questions. I have to get through them. Just because the hon. Gentleman missed out on Question 18, it does not mean that he can have an extended topical question. Let us help each other.

Justin Tomlinson: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

My hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) highlights the importance of working with the public and business. Whereas the shadow Secretary of State sneers at those who are sceptical, we have to win hearts and minds. That is why my hon. Friend will welcome our "Powering Up Britain" plan to secure our energy system by ensuring a resilient and reliable supply, increasing our energy efficiency and, crucially, bringing down bills.

T3. [902308] **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Did the former Energy Minister, the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), leave because he is worried about losing his seat to Labour at the next election, or because he could no longer bear to support the woeful energy policy of this Government? Which one was it?

Claire Coutinho: I direct the hon. Gentleman to the letter of my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart). I reiterate our pride in his work and the amazing contribution he has made to this Government and this country.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): Clayton-le-Moors in my constituency is home to the Lancashire centre for alternative technologies, initiated by the Government's getting building fund. Will the Minister agree to visit to see how the centre is providing financial and research and development support to accelerate the commercialisation of low-carbon technologies?

Andrew Bowie: I agree that it is incredibly encouraging and exciting to see those developments. I would, of course, be delighted to visit my hon. Friend in her constituency at any time.

T5. [90310] **Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Reform UK): Energy Security and Net Zero questions has once again proved to me how out of touch this place is with the rest of the country. The poorest 40% of UK households will be made much worse off by net zero policies, according to a report from York University. The poor in Ashfield will get poorer, and rich eco-fanatics like Dale Vince will get richer and pass on some of his millions to that lot in the Labour party and Just Stop Oil. Can the Minister confirm how much net zero will cost, to the nearest trillion pounds?

Andrew Bowie: I am very proud of what this Government have done to protect the poorest in society from rising bills, which are the result of international factors and a volatile gas market. I make it absolutely clear that the only way that Dale Vince, the climate extremist, and his enablers will come anywhere close to having influence on energy policy is if a Labour Government are elected. Frankly, that is the only thing that voting Reform will achieve.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): At my constituency surgery on Friday, I met representatives of the Riddings Lane solar action group who are concerned about the proposals to build a new solar farm covering 145 football fields' worth of land between the villages of Gleaston, Dendron, Leece and Newbiggin. Does the Minister agree that solar farms are great but should not go on prime agricultural land?

Andrew Bowie: As my hon. Friend is aware, we have a presumption against building on the best and most versatile agricultural land. Due to my quasi-judicial role in planning I cannot speak to the issue directly, but I am very happy to meet him and, indeed, any representatives from his constituency to discuss the project in question.

T6. [902311] **Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): I have been contacted by a popular village pub that is struggling with its energy debt and astronomical energy bill. Such pubs are at the heart of our local communities and they are closing at an alarming rate. Will the Secretary of State consider measures to enable them to manage their historical debt by allowing them to pay it off more slowly, or supporting them in another way so that we can keep these important pubs open?

Amanda Solloway: I could not agree more that these pubs are at the heart of our communities, which is one reason why I have regular meetings with UKHospitality to think about how we can look at bills, including things such as blend and extend.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): On Ynys Môn, companies such as Mona Lifting in Llangefni, supported by the Green Digital Academy, which has been funded by £2.7 million from the community renewal fund, are working hard to use their businesses to help to deliver net zero with the installation of solar panels and charging points. Does the Minister agree that it is thanks to the

UK Government that innovative, forward-thinking companies such as Mona Lifting are leading the way so we can deliver net zero?

Justin Tomlinson: My hon. Friend once again champions her constituency, working with businesses so that in conjunction we can drive up our use of renewables. It is thanks to this Government that we changed the planning rules to make it easier to set up large-scale solar installations. I also welcome households playing their part, with 17,000 solar-panel installations a month last year.

Mr Speaker: I call Rupa Huq.

T7. [902312] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Thank you, and big hugs, Mr Speaker, for the loss of your father.

My constituent Joe Stean did the right thing and switched the family car to electric, but now the cost and lack of charging points have put him into fuel poverty. What are the Government doing to encourage charging options for people who do not live in detached homes? Is it true that the new Minister voted against the zero-emissions vehicle mandate?

Justin Tomlinson: It is an important point. As a proud electric car driver, I have concerns that not all people have equal access to charging, which I have on the driveway to my house. I was therefore thrilled when the Government managed to deliver a 50% increase in EV charging points in the last year alone.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): Energy security is national security, and food security is national security. Up and down the country there are plenty of rooftops, residential, industrial and agricultural, that are suitable for solar panels. Will my hon. Friend the Minister reassure the country that we will prioritise those sites for our solar footprint, rather than jeopardising prime food-producing land or, indeed, our precious greenbelt?

Andrew Bowie: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Food security and energy security are both vital, which is why the UK solar taskforce identified the need to address barriers relating to rooftop solar deployment, including access to finance as a priority. The rooftop subgroup was established to focus specifically on this area, and we are exploring options to facilitate low-cost finance from retail lenders to help households and businesses with the up-front cost of solar installation on rooftops.

T8. [902313] **Stephen Morgan** (Portsmouth South) (Lab): Smart meters are vital to help families to cut bills and save money on their energy outlay, yet the Government's own figures show that 4 million smart meters are faulty. Is that not another catastrophic failure? When is the Secretary of State going to get a grip on the issue?

Amanda Solloway: Clearly this is an issue that concerns us in the Government, which is why we are striving to do everything that we can to make sure that we are solving the issue.

T10. [902315] **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The giant pylons—they are absolutely huge—associated with the transmission route have caused grave concern in the highlands. Can I have an assurance that strong consideration will be given to undergrounding the cables near the communities that are affected and, indeed, to going under the ocean where that is possible? *[Interruption.]*

Justin Tomlinson: While the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) heckles to say that there is yet another nimby, we recognise that we want to work with communities and respect local knowledge to inform present and future works. All transmission projects are required to progress through the robust planning process, which includes statutory consultations and individual planning reviews, and I am sure that the hon. Member will feed into that directly.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Forty per cent. of properties in this country do not even have an energy performance certificate, and of those that do in the private rented sector, and in the private ownership sector, only 30% are EPC C rated. Last year, we made an improvement of only 1% on this. EPC C is the standard, so when does the Minister expect that we will ever get to 100% EPC C in our housing stock, and what are the Government doing to increase the speed of the process?

Amanda Solloway: The pace of delivery of the Great British insulation scheme is accelerating quickly, with the rate of delivery doubling over the past three months. We have a proud record on energy efficiency. In 2010, we inherited a situation in which only 14% of homes were well insulated, but now we have that figure up to nearly 50%.

Rail Manufacturing: Job Losses

12.35 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on steps being taken to prevent job losses in the UK's rail manufacturing sector.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): Mr Speaker, before I start, may I thank you for having me up in your constituency of Chorley over the Easter holiday? I pass on my deepest condolences to you and your family for the loss of your father.

I thank the hon. Lady for her urgent question. I am responding on behalf of the Secretary of State, who will shortly be meeting the Alstom group chairman and chief executive to discuss a potential way forward. The Secretary of State will come to the House and make a statement at the appropriate time, noting the fact that they are sensitive commercial discussions.

As set out in the comprehensive open letter from the Secretary of State to the hon. Lady on 29 March, the Government are well aware that companies such as Alstom and Hitachi face short-term gaps in their order books. The letter set out clearly that these are complex problems to which there are not simple solutions, but the Government have been doing everything they can to support the workforce over many months, and continue to do so.

While Alstom is currently consulting its unions and employees on possible job losses, this must be a commercial decision for Alstom. The Government have been working with the company to explore options to enable it to continue manufacturing at its Derby site. We have convened a cross-Whitehall group to advise on how to support continued production at Derby and how best to support those workers who are at risk of redundancy. We have held similar discussions with Hitachi, both in correspondence and face to face. We remain keen to work with Hitachi as it looks for commercial solutions to guarantee the long-term sustainable future of its Newton Aycliffe site. Hitachi is not currently consulting on any changes to its workforce.

The fact remains that the market for passenger trains is a competitive one. The Department cannot guarantee orders for individual manufacturers. Trains are major assets with a lifetime of 35 to 40 years, so there will naturally be peaks and troughs in the procurement cycle. Nevertheless, we expect substantial continued demand for new trains. In recent months, London North Eastern Railway confirmed an order of 10 new tri-mode trains for the east coast main line. A tender for new trains for TransPennine Express was launched in December 2023.

In January this year, I wrote to train manufacturers to outline the pipeline of current and expected orders for new trains. That included details of current competitions for Northern, Southeastern, Chiltern and TransPennine Express, and an expected procurement by Great Western Railway. The contracts are worth an estimated £3.6 billion, with more than 2,000 vehicles to be procured over the coming years. In the meantime, we will continue to work with UK manufacturers, including Alstom and Hitachi, to ensure that there is a strong and sustainable future for the rail industry.

Louise Haigh: May I add my personal condolences to you, Mr Speaker, for the loss of your great father? He was a fine man and a great champion for Warrington and for workers' rights.

Britain's rail manufacturing is in crisis. Two of our largest train manufacturers have warned that their very presence in this country is at risk. Alstom, in Derby, is staring down the barrel of 1,300 job losses, and Hitachi, in Newton Aycliffe, another 700. In their supply chains, it is more than 16,000 jobs. Alstom has been making trains in Derby for 147 years, but both Alstom and Hitachi are clear that their uncertain future is thanks to this Government's inaction. Alstom's managing director has said that "continued delay" in providing "certainty and clarity" from the Transport Secretary is to blame.

The fact is that the Secretary of State has known about this problem for months. I first raised Hitachi's concerns with him in this House more than a year ago. Both manufacturers have said that the situation could be rectified by amending their order schedules for a small number of existing, privately financed trains, and we understand that the Transport Secretary has been privately promising them action on that for months. But crucial deadlines have been missed, avoidable job losses have already been made and local businesses have already been forced to close.

The Minister dismisses people's livelihoods as "peaks and troughs". In his letter to me of 29 March, the Transport Secretary, as usual, ducked all responsibility. He claimed that he has no influence over procurement contracts, yet his Department has varied contracts in the past. He claimed that this is nothing to do with his mismanagement of HS2, but both struggling manufacturers claim otherwise. He claimed that he is providing certainty for the industry, yet he is refusing to bring forward his long-delayed rail reforms, or set out a rolling stock strategy for the industry.

Britain was the country that created the railways, but that legacy is being trashed by a Conservative Government content to oversee its managed decline. Will the Minister and the Secretary of State finally take responsibility, put aside their ideological opposition to supporting British business, and finally step up for the people of Derby and Newton Aycliffe and for Britain's railways?

Huw Merriman: The hon. Lady asks whether the Secretary of State will take responsibility and work on this matter. He is doing that right now. He is about to start a meeting with the chief executive and chairman. And that is not the first meeting: he has held eight meetings with Alstom and eight with Hitachi to find solutions. Our officials in the Department for Transport have worked incredibly hard, as has everybody in the whole Derby family—the train operator, the unions that I have met and the workforce. We are all rowing together to try to find a solution.

I have to say that it does not help to see this cause being used almost like a political football. As an example, I did not use the expression "peaks and troughs" when it came to dealing with individuals. I said that the procurement cycle leads to that. My words will be clear in *Hansard*, and I resent having them misinterpreted, because it impacts on people and their feelings. I find it quite irresponsible of the Opposition to do that.

Another example of getting the facts completely wrong is the continued mention of HS2. Let me be clear: the order for HS2 was for 54 trains. That order remains at 54 trains, because they were always for phase 1, which is going ahead. The schedule remains the same and the number of trains remains the same, so let us deal with the facts rather than the fiction and scaremongering that I hear so often.

When it comes to facts, let me say that three of the four train manufacturers we are proud to have in this country have been building their plant here since 2010, under this Conservative Government. No doubt they decided to do so because we have commissioned 8,000 new rolling stock vehicles since 2012. The average age of rolling stock was 21 years back in 2016; it is now under 17 years, because we are investing in rolling stock, and there will be more orders. None the less, it is a complex legal solution that requires sensible minds, and I am very proud that the Secretary of State is leading on that endeavour.

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

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I am pleased that the Secretary of State and the Minister are taking charge of negotiations with Alstom, Hitachi and others. I appreciate that as commercially sensitive discussions are ongoing, the Minister is constrained in what he can say, but they need to be resolved soon. The wider issue is the peaks and troughs not just in rolling stock procurement, but in railway industry investment more generally. How does the Minister believe Great British Railways and wider rail reform will help to smooth out the peaks and troughs in the longer term?

Huw Merriman: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for his work. The Committee as a whole has looked at this issue and really probed for solutions. On the GBR point, it is also providing the body of pre-legislative scrutiny of rail reform, and I thank my hon. Friend and his Committee for their work in that endeavour. He is absolutely right that a more holistic approach to the railway, in which track and train are integrated, will help us to make further decisions into the future and give more certainty with regard to orders. None the less, I have set out the orders that have been taken over the preceding years. The order book is healthy and we will look to get the tenders out this year and next for the train operators that I have mentioned.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): My condolences to you and your family, Mr Speaker, on the loss of your father.

Clearly, the news coming out of Derby about the precarious nature of Alstom is grim, not just for the workers and the wider economy of Derby, but for everyone involved in the supply chain across the country, including 24,000 rail supply jobs in Scotland. The fact is that this was predicted; we have all known about it for months. These are skilled, well-paying jobs of the type that we are continually told the UK is in the market for.

Does the Minister accept that the stop-start procurement of new rolling stock is a direct result of the fragmented and disconnected railway system that has placed

financialisation and the Treasury's miserly attitude to investment above rail's key role in a decarbonised 21st-century society? Why are rolling stock leasing companies ruling the roost rather than straightforward procurement? How is it possible that the island that invented the modern railway—the 200th anniversary of the Stockton and Darlington railway is next year—could have next to zero train production capacity within a matter of months? We need a proper rail strategy and integration; when will that rail reform be put before the House?

Huw Merriman: Again, let us look at the facts. Since 2012, 8,000 new rolling stock vehicles have been manufactured—that is out of a total fleet of 15,600, so it is a relatively young fleet. Taking into account the fact that the fleet tends to last 35 to 40 years, and that it now has an average of 17 years' service, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will see that there has been a substantial investment in rolling stock from the Government—the UK taxpayer—and from private train operators.

The hon. Gentleman asks when the legislation for rail reform will be brought forward. I am very keen for that to happen, and it is on its journey right now. The Transport Committee, of which he is a leading member, is providing the pre-legislative scrutiny. I very much hope that the Committee will finish its work in time for the summer recess, giving us two months to respond, and that there will be cross-party support in both Houses for what is I believe is sensible legislation that will allow us to deliver rail reform.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Although Labour is playing party politics on this issue, it is really important for Derby and Derbyshire, including for the workers at Alstom and in the supply chain that feeds into it. Will the Minister confirm that Conservative Members of Parliament have been working with the Secretary of State over the whole period, and that he has been working with Alstom for many, many months to get this right?

Huw Merriman: I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) and for Derby North (Amanda Solloway) for the amount of work that they have put in to press us, privately but firmly, to ensure that we are working on this issue, given their concern as constituency MPs. I could not credit them enough for the amount of work that has gone in on their side, and for doing it sensibly—and that includes those in Derby council, to whom we are grateful. I believe that this is the way to approach the matter. The number of meetings that we have had, the cross-departmental taskforce that is in place and the sheer number of hours that the officials have put in have all led us to a point where we very much hope to be able to provide a solution. The matter is complex—there are legal challenges and these types of contracts often end up in litigation, so we have to be careful with the process—but we are keen to find that solution. I thank my hon. Friends for their work.

Dame Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab): I was disappointed and sorry to hear what the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) just said, because, as she knows perfectly well, there has been a substantial amount of cross-party working on this issue over many months and years. Given that the factory is in my

[*Dame Margaret Beckett*]

constituency, I find it a little disappointing that, although I am told that there have been many meetings between the Secretary of State and local Conservative members, at no point have he or his office chosen to involve me.

However, that does not matter at all; what really matters—and what I find most difficult about this whole issue—is that, over the years that I have been in this House, we have had so many of these conversations about failing industries. We ask what are the prospects for the future, and there is a struggle and, as always, an argument between those who want to look to the long term and those who want short-term financial savings. This is not an industry in which that is the problem. In the longer term, there will be millions of pounds' worth of orders for rolling stock, because rolling stock renewal is needed right across the country, as everybody in the rail industry is aware. It is an industry with prospects and an ongoing, realistic vision of secure, high-value and high-reward jobs, yet one in which Government inaction is, I am afraid, putting those jobs at risk, particularly, as was said moments ago on both sides of the House, in the supply chain.

Huw Merriman: I thank the right hon. Member for the points she has raised. The discussions have been cross-party: the leader of Derby council has worked very closely with the Department to try to broker a solution. I will take away her point about meetings; I do not have that information to hand, but I will ensure she gets the meeting she has asked for.

The point I was making was that the comments from the Labour Front Bench do not help matters at all. This is a sensitive, commercially and legally challenging situation that we are trying to find a way through. We cannot find contracts just for one train manufacturer: we have four, and it has to be an open process, otherwise the matter ends up in court. Despite that, we are doing everything we can to find the right orders for those train manufacturers. As well as the letter I have written to all of the manufacturers, specifying the tender pipeline that is to come, the Secretary of State has written to all the entities that finance train operators, making the point that they should bring forward matters that they can see. That will help with refurbishment, as well as new rolling stock.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I thank the Rail Minister for the huge levels of rail investment going into my constituency. As he knows, alongside my hon. Friends the Members for Dewsbury (Mark Eastwood) and for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates), we secured £48 million of levelling-up cash for upgrades on the Penistone line, with stations at Honley and Brockholes in my constituency. I thank the Rail Minister for visiting Huddersfield railway station last year, and I am pleased to report that a major upgrade, which is part of the £11 billion trans-Pennine route upgrade, is under way at that station. Once that is complete, there will be major upgrades to Slaithwaite and Marsden stations, including disabled access. Rail investment is being delivered to my wonderful part of West Yorkshire.

Huw Merriman: I thank my hon. Friend; he is a champion of the railway, and it was an absolute delight to visit him at Huddersfield station and talk about some

of those projects. Of course, his point is completely relevant to the matter before us. The trans-Pennine route upgrade, for which there will be more Government investment than there was for the entirety of Crossrail, allows us to put an order in for TransPennine Express trains, so there will be more trains manufactured as well as better stations, longer platforms and more resilience. [*Interruption.*] I think that team, which is doing a brilliant job, which *The Sunday Times* has highlighted. Rather than chuntering, it would be nice if the Opposition thanked those who deliver railway projects to time and on budget.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): My condolences on your loss, Mr Speaker. I thank you on behalf of the workforce for granting this urgent question, because the situation is becoming critical.

My union, Unite, tells me that there are over 900 people employed on temporary contracts at Hitachi in Newton Aycliffe and at Alstom in Derby whose jobs are already at risk. This is before any formal redundancies occur; Unite believes that that could happen as soon as June. I am well aware that the Minister knows that the industry needs a steady stream of orders to sustain train manufacturing here in the UK and preserve those vital jobs in areas such as County Durham, where we do not have an abundance of skilled employment, so in all honesty I earnestly ask the Minister to use his good offices to persuade the Secretary of State to intervene urgently and ensure a bright future for this vital UK train manufacturing industry.

Huw Merriman: I certainly take that point from my good friend. The hon. Member has worked tirelessly for the rail workforce, and I know that he means everything he says with passion and conviction. I have talked about the situation being a complex one from a legal perspective, and I would take him back to the contract award for HS2, which went to Alstom and Hitachi. That was challenged in court by Siemens; the Department succeeded on every single point, but that just shows how careful we have to be from a legal perspective during the tendering process, because it will end up in litigation. The worst thing would be to hand out contracts in a manner that is not legally fair and then find that they are being unpicked, which brings fresh uncertainty. Instead, we are looking at the entire order book to see where we can bring matters forward in the pipeline—matters that Alstom may be working on already. Where it is the fair and right thing to do, we are looking to see whether we can bring those contract orders forward in the pipeline.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): The situation at Alstom is of great concern to a number of my constituents who work there. However, probably even more of my constituents work in the supply chain, so will my hon. Friend reassure me and my constituents that whatever the outcome of today's discussions, that supply chain will not be forgotten?

Huw Merriman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are talking not just about the jobs at the manufacturing plant in Derby, but about all the jobs throughout the supply chain. I work really closely with the supply chain and its trade representatives—the Railway Industry Association and Railfuture—and I am keen to continue to do so. Our work and our endeavour is to try to find a

solution, not just for the workforce in Derby working directly for Alstom, but for those who are temporarily employed at Alstom and for the entire supply chain. That is why the Secretary of State is meeting Alstom right now, so that we can try to find a solution for them all.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Government's inaction in signing off new orders for trains is now threatening hundreds of jobs in County Durham and wiping millions of pounds off the value of rail manufacturing companies. Inadequate supply to our rail infrastructure will have a big impact on decarbonising the UK transport system. Is the Minister aware of that, and what are the Government doing in the long term to invest in our rail infrastructure?

Huw Merriman: Thanks to the UK taxpayer, the Government have invested over £100 billion in the railways, and a lot of that investment has gone through to rolling stock. As I have mentioned, the rolling stock is now on average under 17 years old, with a life cycle that goes to 35 to 40 years. I will give the hon. Lady a good example of where the future is bright: in the area of innovation and technology. Great Western has just completed a battery trial for a train that has covered 86 miles, with stops, on just one single charge. My hope is that as well as new orders for trains, we will find new solutions for manufacturing rolling stock that is greener than it is right now.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): My condolences to you, Mr Speaker.

Many of my constituents are involved in rail manufacturing, both at Hitachi and in the wider supply chain, and are genuinely concerned about the situation. Can my hon. Friend reassure me and my constituents that this situation is getting the full attention of the Secretary of State, and can he outline to the House why the issue is not as simple as the stroke of a pen, as alleged by the Labour party?

Huw Merriman: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. He is absolutely right; this is a complex matter, and it is important that we get it right. We are working with Alstom, with the council, and with all other parties.

I should just correct the record: I am very happy to take up this issue with the right hon. Member for Derby South (Dame Margaret Beckett), but my understanding is that she met the Secretary of State for an hour on 25 March, which she said she had not.

Dame Margaret Beckett *indicated assent.*

Huw Merriman: That is correct—good. I am glad I have got that on the record.

My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) is absolutely right. This matter is complex and challenging, but I can tell you, Mr Speaker, and the House that the Secretary of State is working at full pelt on this matter with Alstom. I am hopeful that a solution will be found that will demonstrate all of that hard work.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Derby's Litchurch Lane is unique—the only site in the UK that designs, develops, builds and tests trains. As has already

been acknowledged, the Alstom factory is a very significant employer, but it also supports thousands of good supply-chain jobs, particularly in Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. Frankly, this Government will never be forgiven if that factory is allowed to close due to an entirely avoidable gap in orders. The Minister says that this matter is complex, but my question is simple: when does the Department for Transport intend to issue the invitations to tender for the promised new train fleets for Chiltern, Northern and Southeastern?

Huw Merriman: The answer is over the course of this year and next year for all of the train manufacturers that the hon. Lady has mentioned. I well remember the visit that both she and I made to the Alstom site with the Transport Committee. As she rightly says, it is a fantastic site, which is why we are working to find a solution. I am certainly encouraged by the conversations that have taken place. We know that everyone wants to find that solution—the Government certainly do—but the hon. Lady will know from all her work on the Transport Committee that legal challenges have to be dealt with in the correct manner. This matter is very sensitive, and it is market sensitive as well, so finding a way through which provides certainty and does not get unpicked is absolutely the right thing for us to do, and that is what we are doing right now.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): The threat to the Alstom factory in Derby is of great concern to the employees in Amber Valley and those employed by the supply chain. Their mood is not helped by the fact that this appears to be a problem not with the quality of the trains, or even with their price, but with compliance with procurement rules that we ourselves put in place only a year or so ago. If it comes down to a choice between having all the i's dotted and t's crossed, or having that factory saved for the long term, can I urge the Minister to take a risk on the contract, sort that out later and save the factory, rather than prioritising the contract and risk losing the factory?

Huw Merriman: As my hon. Friend has described, this is a careful balance. I reiterate that if we were to award contracts outside of the usual process, other workforces would also be impacted, such as those in Newport, in Newton Aycliffe and in the Hull area. We have to take into account the whole workforce, as well as fair process on the contract. However, as he mentions, trains are being manufactured right now and rolling off the production line up in Derby—South Western trains and East Midlands trains—and they are good-quality trains. As I have said, the challenge is that we have produced a lot of trains over the years, and I really want to help those train manufacturers to export more, because that will fill up the order books so that they are not reliant only on the domestic market. As it gets fresher and younger, in rolling stock years, we need to find a solution outside this country.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I offer my condolences to you, Mr Speaker.

The Minister says this is a complex issue, but is it not rather simple? These companies will not be around to enjoy the sort of exporting opportunities he talks about if they do not sustain. On his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood),

[Andy McDonald]

can he just apply his mind to what he said about the invitations to tender? If it is going to take that long to issue those tenders, these companies will not be around. It is not about them not competing; it is about their being able to compete and to be here. Can he not recognise that it is the constant chopping and changing in procurement that has landed the rail industry in this terrible situation?

Huw Merriman: I do not accept that. When I met the train manufacturers earlier this year, they said they wanted longer-term certainty, and the reason for setting out what is coming up next is to give them that certainty. Of course, train manufacturing is going on right now. For example, we have just seen the award to CAF for the 10 LNER tri-mode trains, so there is manufacturing and contracts are being awarded. I know I am repeating myself, but as the train rolling stock gets younger in age—it has a life of 35 to 40 years, and its average age is now under 17 years—by definition fewer orders tend to go through. However, it is important to have a future pipeline, which is why I mentioned the orders going to tender for this year and next.

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): Hitachi provides opportunities and high-skilled jobs, benefiting people right across the north-east, including a number in my constituency. Can my hon. Friend confirm that he will continue to look at every possible option to protect these jobs and the north-east's incredible manufacturing capabilities?

Huw Merriman: Yes, indeed. The team at Hitachi as well as Alstom will of course be working on the HS2 tender for 54 trains that will be coming their way. I am very keen to meet them, and I met Hitachi yesterday—albeit a different arm that is more on the signalling side. I am keen to work with the private sector. We are very proud of the train manufacturers we have in this country, and we want to ensure that they sustain and continue to get contracts, and not only from this country but, as I have mentioned, for exports. I really want to see exports, which is why I tend to go abroad to help champion exports in such markets.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): In 1823, Robert Stephenson and Company set up the world's first locomotive factory in my constituency. Is the Conservative idea of an anniversary present to the north-east to end 200 years of railway manufacturing and innovation? The Minister has said this is complex and challenging, but for the sake of Hitachi workers and for our entire region, will he commit to the future of railway manufacturing in the north-east?

Huw Merriman: These are private sector companies. They of course rely on Government-funded contracts, but ultimately they are private sector companies, and this is a matter for them. Our job is to support them, and I have described the order book we have put through since 2012. Of course, any Government or Government in waiting actually have to follow the correct process with our officials and to do things properly, and it is rather telling that the Opposition do not seem to know how proper governance operates. I would just remind

the hon. Member that, since 2010, three of our four train manufacturers have built their plants under a Conservative Government, because they know that this Government are good for business and invest in the railways, as the £100 billion invested since 2010 demonstrates.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): My constituency incorporates the Newton Aycliffe Hitachi factory. As has been mentioned, it is the home of the railways—200 years ago, the first train went on the line just next to the site of the Hitachi factory. We are founded in railways, we want to be in railways, and we always will be in railways. However, the Opposition are treating this as a political football, as the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) has just done. Everybody is saying that this is so simple and can be done at the stroke of a pen. It could not be done at the stroke of a pen when Nexus had the same situation in Newcastle. [Interruption.] No, it was not, and the Opposition had the pen then.

Right here and right now, I am very concerned about what is happening with Hitachi, as I obviously am about Alstom and the supply chains. I have met the unions—I have met Unite several times—and I will continue to do so. It is important that we are all engaged in this properly, and confidentially where appropriate. I have been completely irritated by the number of times the Opposition have said that the Government are not engaged. For most of the time I have been engaging confidentially, as Hitachi has asked. Everybody, including the Prime Minister, has been to Hitachi to understand what exactly the situation is. What we need now is for the unions to be engaged and for Hitachi to use all its innovation and skills. Can I ask the Minister to ensure that he is fully engaged, and will he explain to the Opposition why, if this was so easy, we would not just do it?

Huw Merriman: I thank my hon. Friend because—as he puts it himself, but he is being too modest—he is working with us constantly to ensure that Hitachi's concerns are addressed. We have met Hitachi a number of times. We have great faith in its leadership, and we work closely with them. It is not consulting on any changes to the workforce at the moment. As I have mentioned, it has a share in the order for the 54 HS2 trains. He is absolutely right that the way we will fix these issues is to provide certainty through the tenders coming forward, to continue to invest, to try to get more exports for these train operations, and to work together in a collegiate way, not with scare stories. That is something I am determined to do, and I thank him for the work he does to that end.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): This is political, because this Government have got form in failing industry in the north-east. They abandoned primary steel making on Teesside, they failed to back local investors in the Sirius mine and they allowed the world-renowned Cleveland Bridge & Engineering Co. to collapse, despite promises to save it. Now they are at it again, and this time it will affect countless people from my constituency, which is the home of the first passenger railway. In a statement made just an hour ago, Hitachi has said it wants to continue to explore solutions so that the skills and investment it has in the region are retained. There is

no doubt that these are at considerable risk. Is the Minister really prepared to fail Hitachi, and provide yet another example of how the Tories have abandoned the north-east?

Huw Merriman: The hon. Member's argument is slightly punctured by the fact that Hitachi built its plant after the Conservative Government came to power, because it understands that we support businesses, attract businesses and want them to succeed not only with domestic orders, but with export orders. To say that we are abandoning it, when I have just described how we have had 8,000 new rolling stock vehicles produced since 2012 and the average age has gone down from 21 years to 16.8 years, rather demonstrates that he does not know what he is talking about.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): My hon. Friend is absolutely right that this is a complex scenario, but there really is no need for us to be in one of the troughs in the supply chain at the moment. Chiltern Railways has massive overcrowding because its stock is the oldest fleet, and it is desperate for more trains on the network. We also have East West Rail about to launch with borrowed diesel trains, rather than the new hybrids or hydrogen trains that are fit for the modern age. As my hon. Friend looks at what can be brought forward, will he prioritise Chiltern and prioritise getting the trains that people want to see on East West Rail?

Huw Merriman: I know that my hon. Friend, who is another excellent member of the Transport Committee, has written to the Secretary of State, and we are lining up a meeting to discuss Chiltern's rolling stock. He knows I am very keen to find a solution with some rolling stock that is available, and I am looking to take that forward. He asked about the situation with East West Rail. The consultation will go forward this summer. I have referred to the testing of a battery-powered train that went for 86 miles, and I believe the route from Oxford to Cambridge is 84 miles, which suggests that could be an answer to the point he rightly makes.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I have been chair of the all-party group on manufacturing for some time, I worked in manufacturing at one stage, and I represent the fine manufacturing town of Huddersfield—despite other claims in this House, I am the Member of Parliament for Huddersfield. But this is about job losses and is the Minister aware that under this Government, since 2010, the manufacturing sector in our country has been shrinking and shrinking? Now, less than 10% of people in this country make anything. That is a dire situation, and we see it not only in rail but in defence. The town I represent makes the engines for tanks, guns, ships and all of that sort of stuff, but they do not get the orders in time. The fact of the matter is that all our wonderful manufacturing towns and cities are in peril under this Government. What is the Minister going to do about it?

Huw Merriman: That is the same Huddersfield that I visited with the team from the trans-Pennine route upgrade. We are investing between £9 billion and £11.5 billion in upgrading that route, which not only will make it better for rail passengers, but will provide thousands of jobs, the bulk of them from the local

workforce, of which the trans-Pennine route upgrade team is very proud. That rather demonstrates that what the hon. Member has just stated is not backed up by the facts.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): During the pandemic the Government rightly stepped in to support train operating companies through huge subsidy, which essentially meant subsidising the profits of those companies. The Minister will also know that since British Rail was privatised, the ROSCOs—rolling stock companies—have been highly profitable and lucrative businesses, in my view with very little value for the taxpayer whatsoever. Will the Minister therefore consider two things: first, in this situation with Hitachi and Alstom, seriously consider direct Government intervention to stop these companies going to the wall before they can get the next orders in; and secondly, urgently convene a meeting of local businesses in both those areas with all the rail unions, from Unite to the Transport Salaried Staffs Association, ASLEF, and the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, bringing them together to discuss how we jointly work together to make sure that our brilliant and long-held and highly skilled workforce is not just thrown on the scrapheap for decades to come?

Huw Merriman: A lot of the finance I talked about and the orders that have been brought forward, which is why we have a relatively young fleet, are the result of train operators being able to use their own balance sheets in order to invest. Rail finances are back to only about 80% of where they were pre-covid because of changes in working patterns; that has been more of a challenge, which is why the Government and the taxpayer take on more of the burden. On meetings with the unions, I should reference the meeting I had with union representatives from Alstom and the workforce, who were superb. They wanted to do their business in a sensible, calm way while also challenging, and rightly so. That provides us with the motivation to try to intervene and deliver a solution, and that is what the Secretary of State is doing right now.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): The potential loss of jobs at Hitachi will hit the north-east economy as a whole, and it is vital that we maintain rail manufacturing capability there. What are the Government going to do to ensure that we do not lose that facility because of a gap in orders? What will they do to ensure that does not happen and to save those jobs?

Huw Merriman: It is important to note that Hitachi is not currently consulting on any changes in the workforce, but it is of course concerned and it speaks to hon. Members in this place to put those concerns across, and I welcome that approach. Where train operators have rolling stock that is older and needs renewing, we are putting them out to market—those operators are TransPennine, Northern, Southeastern and Chiltern. Bringing those orders through will assist, but I come back to the export part of this: if our fleet is getting younger, meaning there will not be as many orders, we really need to see our four great manufacturers being able to export more abroad to deliver for UK plc.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What further discussions are the Minister and Secretary of State going to have with the manufacturing and rail unions on this matter?

Huw Merriman: As I have already stated, I have met the Alstom unions myself—I am always very happy to meet the unions, as indeed is necessary. At the moment, however, our work is with Derby City Council and, more importantly, with Alstom, which ultimately will make the decision. It is a private operator and it will be a decision for Alstom, but we want to show what we can do to help with orders and other assistance. We have been working across Government to provide that reassurance so that we can work towards Alstom not only keeping the plant but investing further in it and bringing more of its enterprise into the UK.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers; I do not think anybody in the House could doubt his commitment or that of the Government to improving things, and we thank them for that. What is the Government's strategy for supporting manufacturing companies throughout the United Kingdom to make improvements to attract business and sustain contracts? Will the Government commit to ensuring that all Government contracts are fulfilled with British-manufactured products as standard, in order to give confidence to investment in British manufacturing?

Huw Merriman: I thank the hon. Member, who always puts his points with great kindness and consideration—as a result, he makes better points than some that get chucked around here. I can assure him that I have written to the train manufacturers, met with them and listened to them, and they have said that they want certainty and to know what the pipeline is. We have been working with the Treasury to bring that pipeline forward. The Secretary of State's letter adds another angle: what we are doing there is writing to the ROSCOs to finance train refurbishments and see if those can be brought forward. So we are doing everything we can from our side—within the difficult legal and commercial situation we find ourselves in—to do things correctly, to bring those orders through, and to give more certainty so that those companies will continue to invest in the UK.

Horticultural Peat: Prohibition of Sale

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

1.16 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to provide for the prohibition of the sale in England of horticultural peat by the end of 2024; to provide for certain exemptions from that prohibition; and for connected purposes.

Peatlands are the UK's largest carbon store. They contain more carbon than the forests of the UK, France and Germany combined and are home to some of our most iconic and rarest wildlife, such as the bittern, the swallowtail butterfly, the short-eared owl and the hen harrier, but less than 20% of our peatlands are in a near-natural state: 87% of England's deep peat areas are degraded, damaged or dried out. This is caused by a range of factors including overgrazing and drainage for agriculture as well as extraction for compost and other growing media for gardening and horticulture.

Extraction degrades the state of the wider landscape, damaging wildlife habitats and reducing peat's capacity to prevent flooding and filter water. And of course extraction means that stored carbon is released, contributing to climate change. The Bill would implement the 2022 commitment made by the Government to prohibit the use of peat products in amateur gardening in England by the end of the year.

In 2011 the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs announced support for phasing out peat products with a commitment to legislate if a voluntary approach proved to be ineffective. The Government's 2021 consultation received more than 5,000 responses, 95% of which supported a ban on retail peat sales. The Royal Horticultural Society has backed a ban, and Professor Alistair Griffiths, its director of science and collections, said in 2022:

“Peatlands are the world's largest carbon store on land, with great potential to store carbon long term, helping to reach net zero...To tackle the climate and biodiversity crises, it is essential that we have a sustainable transition to peat-free alternative growing medias. The RHS stopped selling peat-based growing media bags in 2019 and will continue to work with DEFRA, industry and gardeners to accelerate the transition to peat-free.”

We take pride in being a gardening nation and the covid lockdown triggered increased enthusiasm for this great outdoor activity. There has already been a big shift to non-peat compost products thanks to the efforts of the horticulture industry, DEFRA Ministers, campaigners such as Monty Don, and responsible choices made by gardeners.

However, peat can still lurk in gardening products, such as potted house plants and trays of bedding plants. The presence of peat in these products is rarely labelled, meaning even the most ecologically committed gardener may not know it is there. Even the most effective information campaign can only go so far in changing behaviour. Gardeners should be able to buy from a garden centre without fear that their purchase will harm the environment elsewhere.

There are now reasonably priced peat-free composts using materials such as bark, coir and bracken. Thanks to a decision by the Department for Environment, Food

and Rural Affairs, solid digestate from anaerobic digestion will soon become another source of peat-free growing media. Peat alternatives for products such as potted plants are also available. Companies such as B&Q have gone peat-free, as has Kew gardens, and the Royal Horticultural Society is 98% of the way there. The consumer organisation Which? excludes peat-based compost from its product comparisons. While it acknowledges that some peat-free products cost more, it believes that there is now a good range of lower-cost options on the market.

The horticulture industry has had since 2011 to prepare for the phase-out of peat. Thirteen years on, some real progress has been made. Peat use more than halved between 2020 and the end of 2022, including a reduction of nearly 70% in the amateur sector. In 2022, professional use of peat fell below 50% of their total consumption of growing media for the first time, but UK horticulture still used 950,000 cubic metres of peat in 2022, including 471,000 cubic metres in the retail sector. I acknowledge that only a comparatively small proportion of the UK's peat is affected by extraction for horticultural products, but by targeting the demand for peat, we can help keep it in the ground both here and overseas, preventing the damaging release of carbon.

As well as an immediate ban on peat products for retail use by the general public, the Bill would give Ministers the power to use secondary legislation to extend that ban to professional horticulture on a future date. That reflects the fact that there are still barriers to be overcome before we can be confident that reasonably priced peat-free products and production materials are available for the professional sector. However, we need progress there, too, and I urge the Government to press ahead with a clear timetable for the full transition to peat-free products across the horticulture sector. Limited exceptions to the ban will be needed, some of which may need to be permanent, such as in relation to science and research and rare plants, but the 2030 target has been on the table for more than a decade. I call on the industry and the Government to ensure that meaningful change is delivered by the time we reach that 2030 milestone so that UK horticulture moves into its peat-free future and we seize the opportunity to become a global leader in the supply of sustainable compost and growing media.

The Bill should be just one part of a wider strategy to achieve the Government's ambitious target to restore 35,000 hectares of peat by the end of 2025. The United Kingdom is custodian of 3 million hectares of peatland habitats. That includes 13% of the world's blanket bog, which is a globally rare ecosystem protected by international treaties, one example of which I was pleased to visit in County Fermanagh in 2014. More money is being invested in peat protection and restoration than ever before. Growers can apply for funding for the equipment they need to transition away from peat.

DEFRA'S 2021 peatland action plan is backed by £50 million from the Nature for Climate Fund. I was pleased to secure a commitment to that fund in the 2019 Conservative manifesto. Work has been taking place on projects such as the great north bog and at Rookhope in the North Pennines, which I visited on a bitterly cold, windy day back in 2020 with the local MP, my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden). Perhaps even more significant

than that commitment is the fact that the farm support under England's new environmental land management schemes embraces peatland restoration, with the potential for a major long-term flow of funding for this vital task stretching into the future.

Peat not only plays a vital environmental role in our distinctive island habitat, but is part of Britain's identity, history and culture. Landscape ecological planner Jennifer Dowdell described it as

“a grand encyclopaedia, a storehouse of pollen that can help us understand our ecological history and the changing climate”.

Peat's miraculous capacity to preserve organic material has meant that it can offer up evidence of the gruesome practices of our ancestors, when so-called bog bodies are discovered thousands of years after these men and women met a grisly end. Seamus Heaney was just one of several poets and writers to reflect on the deep rich peatland earth of these islands.

Removing peat from amateur gardening gives the House the opportunity to recognise the value of that cultural and ecological heritage; to take active and practical steps to protect and restore precious natural habitats; and to take us closer to our goal of reaching net zero and preventing disastrous climate change. I commend this Bill to the House.

1.25 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I do not object to the right of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) to bring in the Bill, but I put it on record that it will not go unopposed. Much of the content of the Bill that she described seems disproportionate, not based on science or fact and another exercise in gesture politics. This should be remembered as another day when the banners seem to want to get out there to destroy other people's legitimate activities.

I put in a plea on behalf of amateur and professional horticulturalists. Those who have been to plant centres over the past year or so will have noticed that the move to peat-free products has resulted in the quality of those products declining significantly. Plant longevity has declined, because they do not have the natural water retention in their pots that is provided by peat, and it cannot be replaced by peat substitutes. The consequence is that it is becoming increasingly difficult for our domestic horticultural industry to cope with the pressures to reduce peat consumption.

By contrast, almost all our products coming through garden centres and being planted out in gardens and flower boxes across the country come from the Netherlands. What is the Netherlands doing about peat? The latest figures that I have been able to ascertain show that in 2020, the Netherlands imported 2,156,000,000 kg of peat. Some 44.5% of that came from Germany, 9.5% from Estonia, 9.2% from Latvia, 7% or so from Lithuania and 5% from Belgium. What happened to that peat? It was then put with plants that were exported to countries such as the United Kingdom, thereby creating an unfair advantage compared with our homegrown industries.

My right hon. Friend seems to want to go beyond the voluntary approach and to ban professional horticulturalists in this country from using peat in the production of plants, thereby facilitating even greater unfair competition from the Dutch. What proportion of peat is used in

[*Sir Christopher Chope*]

horticulture? It is a very small proportion. I am told that about 95% of the peat consumed in the world is used for peat fires, is put into domestic boilers and mega-incinerators or is a substitute for coal or even natural gas. I concede that that use of peat is extremely dirty, but why are we concentrating on just one particular niche industry in our country—horticulture—and ignoring the much larger problem of the burning of peat for fuel? This morning, I looked up whether it would be possible to buy peat for fuel in this country and found a company offering to provide me with a pallet of 30 25 kg bags of peat for £235. If we can buy peat for fuel, why are we trying to concentrate on banning peat in horticulture, where there is no real substitute?

Some people talk about coir as being a substitute, but the production of coir is carried out mainly in the far east, particularly in Sri Lanka. That coir has to be washed and desalted before it can be prepared for horticultural use, and it then has to be transported halfway across the world. That is not an ecologically friendly way of producing a peat substitute.

The noble Lord Benyon, who deals with these issues in the other place, was spot on when, in a debate last year, in answer to a question from Baroness Humphreys, who was concerned about the lack of a level playing field for EU imports, he said:

“The noble Baroness asks a very important question. We could act unilaterally, which would result in the export of jobs, skills and benefit to our economy to countries which are not bringing in measures as rigorous as we are. We want to ensure that we are operating this in the same way as we buy timber, where we recognise the impact we are having globally as well as nationally. We are seeing a massive reduction in the use of peat, and we want to see it end. We have set forth a clear timetable for that to

happen. The target of 2026, with certain exemptions, will mean that there will be a tiny amount left which will continue to be used. That will maintain some key areas of our food security, such as mushroom production.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords, 9 May 2023; Vol. 829, c. 1664.*]

He could have added blueberry production. Peat is very acidic, Mr Deputy Speaker, and if you try growing blueberries in non-acidic soil, you will find that they die quickly.

The noble Lord Benyon went on to say, in answer to Lord Curry of Kirkharle, that

“in every policy area, there is an unintended consequence unless we fully consider it. In producing alternative media, there is sometimes a cost to the environment. If we are buying coir from abroad, what impact is that having on some very vulnerable parts of the world? There are many other growing media with which we have to ensure that, in our determination to protect our remaining peatlands, we are not exporting the problem and causing problems further afield. It is a very difficult issue, as the noble Lord rightly raises, and I assure him that we are all across this subject.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords, 9 May 2023; Vol. 829, c. 1665.*]

I am concerned that we will not be all across the subject if the Bill, as proposed by my right hon. Friend, goes through unopposed. We need to ensure that any legislation on peat is balanced and proportionate and takes into proper account the needs of our home-grown horticultural industry.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Theresa Villiers, Selaine Saxby, Chris Grayling, Miss Sarah Dines, Robin Millar, Andrew Selous, Dr Thérèse Coffey, Tim Loughton, Tracey Crouch, Sally-Ann Hart, Trudy Harrison and Siobhan Baillie present the Bill.

Theresa Villiers accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time Friday 26 April, and to be printed (Bill 199).

Tobacco and Vapes Bill

Second Reading

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Health and Social Care Committee on 5 February and 6 February 2024 (Q391-412), on Prevention in health and social care, HC 141]

1.35 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Victoria Atkins): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Before I start, I should declare an interest: before I was elected to Parliament, I used to prosecute serious and organised crime, including organised crime gangs who attempted to import illicit cigarettes.

For a moment, I would like us to imagine that we are not in this historic and magnificent Chamber but instead standing at the entrance of a local hospital. A patient comes through the doors, struggling to breathe; smoking sent their asthma spiralling out of control. A minute later, another patient passes by; smoking caused the heart disease that they are battling. A minute later, another person comes in, and then another. That vicious cycle repeats itself nearly every minute of every day in our national health system, because here in the United Kingdom almost one hospital admission a minute is the human cost of smoking.

Smoking leaves people with premature dementia. It puts them in care, attached to oxygen, for the rest of their life. It increases the risk of stillbirth by almost 50%. It is responsible for 75,000 GP appointments every month, and it takes about 80,000 lives every year.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): I urge everyone who has come to the debate to go to a respiratory ward—I served on one for a year in my first junior doctor role—to watch people gasp for breath, struggle and fight, with their relatives asking you as a doctor to do something and you simply cannot. If the Bill is a step forward in stopping that situation, I am very much in favour of the Secretary of State taking it forward.

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing to the Chamber his professional experience and the real-life consequences for his patients. If I may, I will unpack some of the details behind that invaluable intervention. The premise behind the Bill is exactly as he says—to stop the start—because there is no safe level of smoking and no safe tobacco product. In fact, it is the only product that, if consumed as the manufacturer intends, will kill two thirds of its long-term users.

The Bill is not about demonising people who smoke or stopping them from buying tobacco if they can do so today. It will not affect current smokers' rights or entitlements in any way. Indeed, we want to help them to quit. We are supporting them by almost doubling funding for local stop-smoking services. Instead, the Bill is looking to the future, to give the next generation the freedom to live longer, healthier and more productive lives.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): How does the Secretary of State counter the Conservative argument that if we ban something, we massively increase criminality?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend. I will genuinely come to that, because I know that that is a concern that colleagues have. I will develop my arguments, if I may, but I also remind him of my declaration of interest and, believe you me, I have no interest whatsoever in making life easier for smoking gangs. That is why as part of the package I will announce further funding and investment for law enforcement agencies both at the border and at local level.

Some have said that it is concerning that we are banning things. I totally understand the concerns of fellow Conservatives. We are not in the habit of banning things—we do not like that. We will bring these powers in only when we are convinced—following a no doubt robust debate, with the intellectual self-confidence that we have on the Government Benches—that there is no liberty in addiction. Nicotine robs people of their freedom to choose. The vast majority of smokers start when they are young. Three quarters say that if they could turn back the clock, they would not have started. That is why, through the Bill, we are creating a smoke-free generation that will guarantee that no one who is turning 15 or younger this year will ever be legally sold tobacco, saving them from the misery of repeated attempts to give up, making our economy more productive and building an NHS that delivers faster, simpler and fairer care. It is our responsibility—indeed, our duty—to protect the next generation. That is what the Bill will do.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The Secretary of State is right that we should protect the next generation. Labour proposed the smoke-free generation legislation in January 2023. We voted to crack down on marketing vapes to children in 2021, but the Tories blocked it. I welcome this Bill, but does it not show that where Labour leads, some Conservatives follow? Is she not concerned about the number of her colleagues, who we see lined up in the Chamber, who will vote against this legislation today?

Victoria Atkins: That is a brave submission from the hon. Lady, given the debate in the Chamber yesterday. I certainly will not take lectures from Labour on this legislation. We are bringing it forward because we have looked carefully at the evidence. What is more, we have tempered it so that existing adult smokers will not be affected. If the message from the Labour party is that it wants to ban smoking for adults completely, it should make that argument. We have tempered this carefully to ensure that it only deals with future generations.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for her approach to young people smoking, her determination to deal with illegal tobacco and her crackdown on vaping, which is a menace to young people as these things are sold like an item of confectionery. Will she accept that in doing all those things, she needs to be open minded about how the Bill can be improved? The idea of a rolling age of consent, with the consequence that someone of 35 will be able to buy tobacco but someone of 34 will not and so on, is at best a curiosity and at worst an absurdity.

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend and close Lincolnshire neighbour. He knows that on any piece of legislation I will always want to

[Victoria Atkins]

listen to and do business with colleagues. The principle behind this legislation is that these emerging generations will never take up smoking. That is the point.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab) *rose*—

Sir Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con) *rose*—

Victoria Atkins: I will just finish this point. We are bringing forward this legislation so that we stop the start from 2027. Future generations will not have that addiction to nicotine.

Ms Brown: Let me say from the outset that I completely support this Bill. In Newham, 22% of sales last year were to under-age children—higher than alcohol, knives, fireworks and so on—and a total of £135,000-worth of illicit tobacco products were seized in just six months. Will the Secretary of State ensure that councils get the resources they need to continue the vital work of keeping these products out of the hands of the young?

Victoria Atkins: Yes, I can assure the hon. Lady, because the illicit trade is often the greatest in the most deprived areas of the country, and I am about to develop exactly how we will help law enforcement. I very much understand the concerns across the House about ensuring that the illicit trade does not flourish.

Sir Jake Berry: Has my right hon. Friend seen the latest statistics that say twice as many schoolchildren smoke cannabis as smoke tobacco? It is already illegal—for all of us, not just children—to smoke cannabis. If a ban really worked, how can she explain those statistics? How can she show that this ban to stop people who are currently 15 will be different from the anti-drugs legislation that we already have?

Victoria Atkins: To be clear, is my right hon. Friend suggesting that we repeal the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, under which cannabis is prohibited? Although I have no experience of it, I understand that the consumption of marijuana also involves the consumption of tobacco and cigarette papers. The point is that we are trying to move away from the idea that current youngsters will be able to buy their cigarettes legally in shops from the age of 18 in 2027, precisely because we want to ensure that they can lead longer, healthier lives. In a moment I will come to some of the myths that the tobacco industry has put around about the impact of introducing age restrictions on cigarettes, which will be interesting evidence for those who are concerned about that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First of all, I commend the Secretary of State and the Government for bringing forward this legislation. I support it because I believe it is right, but I have been contacted by vaping groups. My right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) and I met some last week. They sent me a small comment, and I want to ask the Secretary of State a quick question about it, so that we move forward with consistency to try to achieve something.

Those groups referred to the impact assessment report by the Department of Health and Social Care, and said that it fails to consider potentially detrimental effects of

restricting vape users and smokers looking to switch. I think we all try to be helpful and constructive in our comments in this Chamber, so being constructive, they requested a vape retailer and distributor licensing scheme in the Bill. The industry has developed a comprehensive framework for such a scheme, which is designed to deal effectively once and for all with underage and illicit vape sales—a situation that could get worse. Does the Secretary of State intend to develop a vape retailer and distributor licensing scheme?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful for the hon. Gentleman's support. We understand the level of lobbying that has been undertaken by both the vaping industry and the tobacco industry. We know that the vaping industry has pushed that as one of its lines. In the current vapes market, when walking into a local shop or a newsagent the vape products can be seen on sale next to the till, often next to the sweets—the part of the shop that children will be very attracted to, if my experiences are anything to go by. The industry markets them in very cynical ways. We are saying that it is already unlawful to sell vapes to under-18s, but we want to take the powers in this legislation to consult on flavours, design and so on, to ensure that vapes are sold as they are intended—to help adult smokers to quit, because no child should ever vape.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con) *rose*—

Victoria Atkins: I am going to make a little progress, if I may, because I want to come to the age of sale.

On the point raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Sir Jake Berry) about the age of sale and the black market, tobacco industry representatives claim that there will be unintended consequences from raising the age of sale. They assert that the black market will boom. Before the smoking age was increased from 16 to 18, they sang from the same hymn sheet, but the facts showed otherwise. The number of illicit cigarettes consumed fell by 25%, and smoking rates for 16 and 17-year-olds dropped by almost a third. Consumption of illegal tobacco plummeted from 17 billion cigarettes in 2000-01 to 3 billion cigarettes in 2022-23. That is despite the further controls that this House has put in place in the meantime. Our modelling suggests that the measures in this Bill will reduce smoking rates among 14 to 30-year-olds in England to close to zero as soon as 2040. I hope that many of us in the Chamber today will still be here in 2040. This is our opportunity to play that part in history.

Thanks to constructive engagement with colleagues across the devolved Administrations, the measures will apply not just in England but across our entire United Kingdom, saving lives and building a brighter future. Having listened carefully to colleagues' concerns about enforcement, we are making sure that local authorities will be able to keep every penny of the fixed penalties they bring in to reinvest in rigorous enforcement. In other words, we are looking not just at national enforcement, but at helping our very important and valuable local trading enforcement officers to keep the proceeds from the fixed penalties they hand out.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, largely, the Bill will not affect people in this House but younger people, and that it is therefore incredibly important to listen to their voices on this

issue? With that in mind, I wrote to every secondary school in my constituency to ask young people their views. The majority of young people in Chelmsford, when asked for their views, said they would support the measures in the Bill. It was not unanimous, but we work by majority. Given that it affects them and not me, I will be respecting their views when I vote today.

Victoria Atkins: I thank my right hon. Friend. Yet again, she reminds us what a brilliant local constituency MP she is. She has drawn out the voice of young people. When I pose questions about our NHS and the future I want to build for it—reforming it to make it faster, simpler and fairer—one thing I think about is the voice of younger people. If they are in work paying their taxes, they are paying for our NHS at this moment and they will be the users of it in the future. Part of my role as Health Secretary is to ensure that it has a sustainable funding model, that we are doing everything we can to increase productivity, and that we move the demand curve so that it celebrates its next 75 years.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. She knows that I take a particular interest in the impact of retail crime. The British Retail Consortium indicates that there are about 1,300 acts of violence against shopkeepers across the UK daily. It has been suggested that one of the biggest triggers of attacks on shopkeepers is asking for proof of age. What additional resources can be put in to assist retailers and ensure they are protected from attacks?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman raises a very fair point. Interestingly, the latest survey of retailers shows—I think I am right in saying it—that the majority of retailers support this policy, but he knows just how carefully the Government have listened to the concerns of retailers. My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) has led a relentless campaign on this issue, and I was really pleased that the Home Secretary was able to announce in recent weeks a specific crime relating to violence against retail workers.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I smoked until 30 years ago and it was a very hard business to stop the evil weed. I come from a completely different era and I am considered something of a dinosaur. [HON. MEMBERS: “Never!”] But I do still hope to be here in 2040. I wish to God that vapes had been around when I was going through the process of stopping smoking. Do we not need to be very careful that the Bill does not throw the baby out with the bathwater and stop helping people come off the evil weed?

Victoria Atkins: First of all, I completely reject my hon. Friend’s suggestion that he is a dinosaur. He brings a great energy and effervescence into the Chamber—or indeed any social situation. He articulates really well the struggle of addiction to nicotine and how tough it can be to give up. That is not a judgment on anyone; the substance is designed to addict. That is how the sales pitch is made. What we are trying to do is stop children being ensnared in that way. He is also right that at the moment the evidence suggests that vaping is a good way to help existing smokers to quit. If you do not smoke, please do not vape. Certainly, children should never vape. What we have tried to do with the Bill is build a

balance in, so we are taking powers to look at packaging, flavours and so on. There will be a thorough consultation before any regulations are set, because we want to ensure that we are helping adults to quit, but in a way that is considered and well designed. I am extremely grateful to him for raising that point.

Alexander Stafford: I am listening very carefully to what my right hon. Friend is saying. She outlined how the consumption of cigarettes has collapsed over the last couple of decades, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) talked about how the young people she reached out to do not want to smoke any more. Is that not the heart of the matter? That is why I think the Bill is fundamentally wrong and misguided. Young people are not smoking. It is not cool to smoke. The Bill should be focused more on the vape side of things: illegal vapes, supercharged vapes, the colour and flavour of vapes. We are debating cigarettes, which are naturally going out of existence anyway, rather than focusing on the dangerous vapes that are addictive for young children. That is where the Government should put their focus, rather than wasting time talking about something that is dying out anyway.

Victoria Atkins: Sadly—I say this genuinely—there is nothing inevitable about a decrease in smoking rates. Indeed, in 2020 the United States saw the first increase in tobacco sales in 20 years, and in Australia in 2022 the proportion of teenagers smoking increased for the first time in 25 years. I am reminded by a Minister that here in the United Kingdom 100,000 children and young people take up smoking every year. We must not be lulled into a sense of inevitability and security, mindful as I am of how very clever the tobacco industry is at lobbying its messages because we are threatening its business model. As Conservatives, we must take into account that this is happening today, so we must ensure we tackle it head on.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. She is making a very important point about young people and children smoking today. It is not just about cigarettes. Shisha smoking, in particular in Westminster, Marylebone and Edgware Road in my constituency, has become very fashionable for young people. An hour of smoking shisha equates to 100 to 200 cigarettes within an hour. Will she confirm that shisha tobacco will be included in the Bill?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing the City of Westminster right into the Chamber. There are, in fact, five times more people in England today smoking non-cigarette tobacco, which includes cigars and shisha, than there were a decade ago. Worryingly, the greatest increase is in young adults. That is why we have said that tobacco in all its forms is a harmful product, and that we therefore wish to ensure we are consistent in the policy and the messaging that this is about helping young people to stop the start.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab) *rose*—

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Victoria Atkins: I am going to make some progress and then I will give way.

[Victoria Atkins]

As I have said, the tobacco industry questions the necessity of the Bill on the grounds that smoking rates are already falling. It is absolutely correct that smoking rates are down, but as I said, there is nothing inevitable about that. Smoking remains the largest preventable cause of death, disability and ill health. In England alone, creating a smoke-free generation could prevent almost half a million cases of heart disease, stroke, lung cancer and other deadly diseases by the turn of the century, increasing thousands of people's quality of life and reducing pressure on our NHS. An independent review has found that if we stand by and do nothing, nearly half a million more people will die from smoking by the end of this decade. We must therefore ask what place this addiction has in our society, and we are not the only ones to ask that question of ourselves. We know that our policy of creating a smoke-free generation is supported by the majority of retailers, and by about 70% of the public.

The economic case for creating a smoke-free generation is also profound. Each year smoking costs our economy a minimum of £17 billion, which is far more than the £10 billion of tax revenue that it attracts. It costs the average smoker £2,500 a year—money that those people could spend on other goods and services or put towards buying a new car or home. It costs our entire economy by stalling productivity and driving economic inactivity, to the extent that the damage caused by smoking accounts for almost 7p in every £1 of income tax we pay. As Conservatives we are committed to reducing the tax burden on hard-working people and improving the productivity of the state, which is why this Government have cut the double taxation on work not once but twice, giving our hard-working constituents a £900 average tax cut. That is a moral and principled approach.

Having celebrated the first 75 years of the NHS last year, I am determined to reform it to make it faster, simpler and fairer for the next 75 years, and part of that productivity work involves recognising that we must reduce the single most preventable cause of ill health, disability and death in the UK. This reform will benefit not just our children but anyone who may be affected by passive smoking, and, indeed, future taxpayers whose hard-earned income helps to fund our health service. Today we are taking a historic step in that direction. Creating a smoke-free generation could deliver productivity gains of £16 billion by 2056. It will prevent illness and promote good health, help people to get into work and drive economic growth, all the while reducing pressure on the NHS.

Alex Cunningham: Of course, the tax burden is the highest it has been for some considerable time. I welcome the Bill, but the Khan review estimated that the Government's smoke-free ambition would not be fulfilled in poorer communities until 2044, and there are many such communities in my constituency, so how will the Bill tackle that issue? Will it really be another 20 years before we see a result in poorer communities?

Victoria Atkins: No, because, as I have said, the modelling suggests that among the younger generation smoking levels will be close to zero by 2040. As for the hon. Gentleman's point about tax, I do not remember him voting against the Government's furlough scheme

and other support during covid; nor do I remember him complaining that we were trying to help people with the cost of living. We as Conservatives understand that this is sound money, rather than the magic money tree that will somehow fund Labour's £28 billion black hole.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I am somewhat perplexed by this debate, and indeed by the Bill. I do not consider it to be enforceable, and I also think it fails to take into account the effective tax measures and health campaigns that have been run by successive Governments to reduce the number of smokers. Nor does it respond to the fact that, in the long run, bad and poor diets are likely to kill more people than smoking. According to a recent study conducted by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation in Seattle, more people are dying from malnutrition than from smoking. There is a principle at stake here: should the Government step in and deal with people who are eating unhealthy food?

Victoria Atkins: I am, of course, responsible for healthcare in England, so I will not trespass on the health needs of people in—as I think my hon. Friend said—Montreal. As for the Bill, it is intended to help children and young people to end their addiction to nicotine, which we know is one of the most addictive substances. As I said earlier, we should not assume that decreases in smoking rates such as those we have seen are inevitable; indeed, I have cited countries in which we have seen an increase. We also know that tobacco is being consumed in ways that are different from the ways in which it was consumed, say, 20 years ago. My hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), for instance, mentioned the rise of non-cigarette tobacco smoking. We are trying to address that, for the health of the individual as well as the wider health of society.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Victoria Atkins: I have already taken an intervention from the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley). I will take one more, from the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), and then I will make some progress—although I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) in a moment.

Rachael Maskell: The Secretary of State has talked about addiction to nicotine. If, as she has suggested, vaping is a pathway to stopping smoking, why does she not envisage a vape-free generation arriving in parallel with a smoke-free generation, so that we can have a nicotine-free generation across the board? Why does she not expand her legislation to ensure that young people take up neither smoking nor vaping?

Victoria Atkins: The House has already legislated to ensure that vapes cannot be sold to people under 18. However, as we are seeing in our local shops, the vaping industry is finding ways of marketing its products that seem designed for younger minds and younger preferences. Once the Bill has been passed, that age limit will be maintained for vaping but, importantly, from January 2027 onwards we will not see the sale of legal cigarettes or tobacco to those aged 18 or less.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Victoria Atkins: No; I want to make some progress. I want to say something about the measures on vaping because, as Members have already demonstrated today, there is a great deal of interest in the subject.

As any parent or teacher will know, there has been a dramatic and dangerous increase in youth vaping. At least one in five children have tried it. Many will say that the solution is simply to enforce the law, and of course that is a vital component, which is why we are investing £30 million in our enforcement agencies and hitting cynical businesses that sell vapes to children with on-the-spot fines. However, we must and will go further, because vaping damages our children's future. It could damage their lungs while they are still developing, intensify the long-term pressure on the NHS, and damage their concentration at school—a point that many teachers have made.

We cannot replace one generation addicted to nicotine with another, and vapes are cynically marketed towards our children. They are sold at pocket-money prices, they share shelf space with sweets, they are branded with cartoon characters, and they are given flavours such as cotton candy and watermelon ice. Our children are being exploited, and we cannot and will not let that continue. The Bill will give us powers to crack down on child-friendly flavours and packaging and to change the way in which vapes are displayed in shops—measures on which we will consult.

Through separate environmental legislation we are banning the disposable vapes that young people favour and that do so much harm to our planet. Some 5 million are thrown away, either in bins or on our streets, every single week. That is equivalent to some 5,000 lithium car batteries from electric vehicles being thrown away every year. We have a responsibility to tackle the harm to our planet that is perpetrated by the vaping industry. While vapes can be helpful in assisting adult smokers to quit, our message remains clear: if you do not smoke, do not vape, and children should never vape.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way; she is being very generous. The Bill gives her wide-ranging powers in relation to the flavours of vape liquid, packaging and so on, but does not oblige her to consult widely or look at impact statements. In fact, the word “consultation” does not appear anywhere in the Bill. Will she give the House a commitment that she will consult fully before exercising any powers given to her by the Bill?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting that. I give a commitment here at the Dispatch Box that we will consult. We are very conscious of the complexities of this issue. We want to get it right, and my hon. Friend has my absolute undertaking that we will consult before regulations are brought before the House.

Ian Paisley: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Victoria Atkins: If the hon. Gentleman wants to dive in before I conclude, I will let him do so.

Ian Paisley: That is kind of the Secretary of State. I appreciate her taking these interventions.

Given that this is a flagship policy for the Government, will the Secretary of State give me a guarantee from the Dispatch Box that the Bill will apply equally to all parts

of the United Kingdom? I have raised a number of concerns about the fact that because we have a land border with the European Union, the EU will insist, under the Windsor framework, that it can block the implementation of the Bill in Northern Ireland, as it did with the Danish Government when they tried to introduce a similar measure. Can I have a guarantee that if the Bill will apply from 2027 in the United Kingdom, it will apply in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising a really important point. May I, through him, thank the new Northern Irish Health Minister, who has been very collaborative in bringing forward what needs to be brought forward as quickly as possible, given the historical context, so that we can have the Bill aligned across the United Kingdom? Our intention is absolutely as the hon. Gentleman describes: it applies throughout the United Kingdom. Of course, if he or his colleague in Belfast have concerns that there may be ways in which it could somehow be circumnavigated, we will listen carefully, but I should be clear that our intention is that the Bill applies to all children and young people across the United Kingdom, because we want to protect children living in Northern Ireland just as much as those in England, Wales and Scotland.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): On the Secretary of State's point about tackling illicit tobacco, I raised that question with the then Prime Minister in 2016, because in Medway we had one of the highest rates of illicit tobacco sales. The maximum sentence that can be given for the supply and sale of illicit tobacco is seven years. As part of the strategy to deal with illicit tobacco, will the Government look to increase sentences for its sale and supply? The Secretary of State is right to say that the Conservative party is committed to lower taxation, but tax avoidance and evasion costs this country £2 billion. If we do not get things right with regard to the banning of cigarettes, which I do not agree with—I think we should do it through education and awareness—we will get more people buying illicit tobacco. That cannot be right.

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend gives me the ideal opportunity to talk about my favourite criminal offence: cheating the public revenue, which is a criminal offence with very settled law. It has a maximum sentence of life imprisonment, and I have deployed it myself against the organised crime gangs to which I referred at the beginning of my speech. A sensible prosecutor will always look at that criminal offence, because it is settled law and good law, and it has a maximum sentence of life imprisonment for those who indulge in it.

Vicky Foxcroft: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Victoria Atkins: I am going to conclude. In fairness, I have been generous with my time.

We want to build a brighter future for our children and grandchildren, which means moving from the tossing sea of cause and theory to the firm ground of result and fact. The result of this legislation will be to free future generations from the tyranny of addiction and ill health. The facts include that parents worry about youth vaping and want us to take on the tobacco and vaping industries.

[Victoria Atkins]

The result and facts of this change will save hundreds of thousands of lives, reduce pressure on our NHS and increase millions of young people's chances in life. The decisions we make today will stand the test of time. For those many reasons, I commend the Bill to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I will try not to impose a strict time limit. If I were wishing to speak, I would start to think about taking seven minutes for my contribution. That does not apply to the shadow Secretary of State.

2.14 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Until the early 2000s, every pub you walked into was filled with smoke. One in every four people in this country was a smoker. The last Labour Government banned smoking in public places, which had an enormous impact on the health of our nation. The following year, there were 1,200 fewer hospital admissions for heart attacks, according to the *British Medical Journal*. Since 2007, the number of people who smoke has been cut by almost a third. Our understanding of second-hand smoke grew, and there was a cultural change around where it was acceptable to smoke. Even at home, people went outside to smoke, instead of smoking in front of their children.

A study in Scotland found that whereas hospital admissions for children with asthma were increasing by 5% a year before the smoking ban, admissions were down by 18% in the three years following Labour's legislation. In short, Labour helped to build a healthier society: smoking was down, the number of patients needing treatment was down, NHS beds were freed up and lives were saved. But there is more to do. During the 13 years when Labour was last in office, life expectancy was extended by three and a half years, but in the 14 years that the Conservatives have been in office, it has grown by just four months. For men, it is beginning to decline. We are falling into ill health earlier in life today than we were a decade ago, which is a shameful indication of our country's decline.

What more motivation could this House need for once again taking seriously the health of our nation? Today, smoking remains a scourge on our society. Some 75,000 GP appointments every month are to deal with the impacts of smoking. The cost to our economy, after taxes, is £10 billion. Around 80,000 of our friends, neighbours and colleagues lose their lives to smoking every year. It is a lethal addiction, a scourge on society, an enormous burden on our NHS and a drag on our economy, and it is time to consign it to the dustbins of history. Let us act today so that the next generation of young people can live healthier, happier and longer lives than the generations before them.

Labour will give our wholehearted support to this Bill. In fact, we needed no persuasion. In an interview with *The Times* in January last year, I said that it was time for a New Zealand-style smoking ban. I argued that a progressive ban would have a transformational impact on the health of individuals, the health of the nation as a whole and the public finances.

After around two and a half years in this job, I am getting used to the Government nicking Labour's policies. In the last year alone, the magpies opposite have swooped

in on Labour's NHS workforce plan, Labour's plan to recruit dentists in the most under-served areas, Labour's plan for a windfall tax on oil and gas giants, and Labour's plan to abolish the non-dom tax status. Even so, I was shocked when I saw that the Conservative party—the party of Ken Clarke—is nicking the Labour party's plan for a progressive ban on tobacco. Of all the policies that the Conservatives have adopted from the Labour party in the past few years, nothing shows our dominance in the battle of ideas more than this latest capitulation.

Where Labour leads, the Conservatives follow. Indeed, when I first floated this proposal, Conservative MPs called it “nanny state” and “an attack on ordinary people and their culture”,

and I was accused of “health fascism”. What irony, when Conservative MPs are overseas today in Brussels, lining up with the European far right. Anyway, it is water off a duck's back to me. I am delighted that just a few months later the Prime Minister announced this policy at the Conservative party conference, and that a Conservative Health Secretary has brought this progressive ban before Parliament today.

However, it seems that not every Conservative Member got the memo. It has been widely reported, and we have seen indications of it today, that there are still Members on the Conservative Benches—as many as 100, if we believe rebel Tory briefings to the media, although in our experience these Tory rebellions tend to evaporate when the moment comes—who resist the new interventionist consensus, who continue to fly the flag for small-state libertarianism, and who believe that the Health Secretary and the Prime Minister have surrendered to the lobbying of big health and those tyrants in Action on Smoking and Health, the British Heart Foundation, Cancer Research UK, Diabetes UK, Alzheimer's Research UK, Mind, Asthma and Lung UK, the Royal College of Physicians, the Royal College of General Practitioners, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, the Royal College of Midwives and the British Medical Association. Well, we happily align ourselves with big health in defence of the nation and we are only too happy to defend the Health Secretary against the siren voices of big tobacco that we see gathered around our former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), in the corner of the Chamber today.

Sir Jake Berry: On the issue of unity, does the hon. Gentleman agree with the comment made by his colleague the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) that if we bring in a progressive ban on cigarettes, we should mirror it with a similar ban on vaping? If he becomes Health Secretary, will that become the policy that he will promote?

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend the Member for York Central made the really good point—a point that needs to be well understood in the context of this debate—that vaping is undoubtedly, unquestionably a useful smoking cessation tool, but we should not send the message to the country that vaping is good for our health or that it is without harmful consequences. When it comes to banning things, it should be on the basis of evidence and there should not be a predisposition to ban. I have not yet seen evidence to persuade me that vaping is harmful enough to introduce a ban of the sort suggested

by my hon. Friend the Member for York Central. I hope I can reassure the right hon. Gentleman that, when the general election eventually comes, the Labour party will not go around trying to ban things left, right and centre, but I certainly want to consign to the history books the 244,000 people on NHS waiting lists in his area as a direct result of the policies of the Government whom he supports and has served.

Sir Jake Berry *rose*—

Wes Streeting: I will happily give way. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman would like to take the opportunity to apologise to his constituents in Rossendale and Darwen for his abysmal record in government.

Sir Jake Berry: I will resist the hon. Gentleman's offer. He has just said that vaping should only ever be used to help people to stop smoking cigarettes. If this Bill passes, it will be illegal for people who are now aged 15 ever to smoke cigarettes, so there will be no requirement in his world for them ever to vape. So I repeat the question, which he has refused to answer: will the Labour party bring forward—this is supported by his own party—a ban on vapes to mirror the tobacco ban? Yes or no?

Wes Streeting: The record will show that I answered the right hon. Gentleman's question. I talked about banning things and taking away people's choice, and there are plenty of things that we do on a daily basis that might be harmful to our health in some way. Indeed, participating in most physical contact sports carries a risk of injury, but we are not going to ban football, rugby or boxing. I refer him to my previous answer, which is that I have not seen evidence to persuade me to ban vaping in the way that this Government are proposing to phase out smoking. I have answered that question already and I answer it again now, but I am sure that it will not be lost on the people of Rossendale and Darwen that he did not take the opportunity to apologise to the 244,000 people in his area who are stuck on record long waiting lists.

Once again, the Prime Minister has shown that he is too weak to stand up to his party. The psychodrama in the Conservative party is being put before the interests of the country. In the press today, the Secretary of State for Business and Trade, the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch) is the latest to let it be known that she will be opposing this Bill. Journalists were helpfully pointed towards comments about her belief in the limits of the state made during her last leadership campaign. I say "her last leadership campaign", but I am sure that it will not be her last leadership campaign. Indeed, I do not think it has ever stopped. Anyway, that is what she said. In fact, she bemoaned Governments who try to "solve every problem". Well, if she has a problem with Governments solving problems, she must be delighted with the record of this Government, who can barely solve any problems. They cannot even solve the chaos in their own party.

The Business Secretary is not the only one who is desperate to tell Conservative party members that they oppose this Bill. The former Prime Minister joins us today. The right hon. Member for South West Norfolk and recently declared candidate to be the next leader of the Conservative party, has said that the Bill is "profoundly unconservative". A stopped clock is right twice a day,

and I find myself agreeing with the former Prime Minister. This is absolutely an un-Conservative Bill. It is a Labour Bill, and we are delighted to see the Government bring it forward. [*Interruption.*] Yes, even this stopped clock is right twice a day for the Trussites in the corner. The right hon. Lady is in fine company when it comes to former Prime Ministers. Boris Johnson has said that this proposal is

"absolutely nuts...It's just mad".

Well, now he knows how the rest of us felt when he was Prime Minister.

The right hon. and learned Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman) could not be with us today because she is currently in Brussels surrounded by the police who are trying to shut down the event she is attending with some far right fanatics, with whom she has much in common. A source close to the right hon. and learned Lady has said that she is "not a fan" of the Bill. Well, now she knows how the rest of us feel about her, too.

Some dark horses have also spied an opportunity to play to the gallery. It seems that even my former *bête noire*, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), fancies his chances in the ongoing battle for the Conservative leadership, because he too has come out against this Bill. To be fair, he has a strong case for the leadership of the Conservative party. As Health Secretary, he had to face a workforce in constant dispute with him, which is good practice for dealing with the party, and he has to deal with a steady stream of toxic sewage in his current job, so who could be more experienced in coping with the travails of the modern Conservative party than the right hon. Gentleman?

I want to praise the one member of this Government who has consistently made the case for the Government's Bill. No, of course I am not talking about the Prime Minister. Since his party conference speech in October he has shrunk away from the debate, once again too weak to stand up to his own party, and instead left it to others to make the case for him. To her credit, the Health Secretary has cast aside any leadership ambition she may have once held and come out in full-throated defence of Labour's policy. So let me assure my comrade opposite that we will stand with her today in the voting Lobby, even as the forces of conservatism stand against her.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): Going back to the subject of what we are trying to debate rather than playing a political game, I hope that the hon. Gentleman is not going to pick up a sheet and throw some figures at me, because this is a serious question. When my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) asked a question about a consultation on vaping, those on the Opposition Front Bench shook their heads at the idea. Can I ask why? As a former smoker myself, I have moved to vaping in order to quit smoking, and I genuinely think that this issue needs to be considered. I ask the hon. Gentleman a simple question: why does the Labour party think a consultation should not go ahead?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention. It falls to me to defend the Government against their own Members, but to be fair to this Government, they have consulted on measures to clamp down on inappropriate vaping. They have consulted,

[*Wes Streeting*]

and we have been urging them to go faster in cracking down on the sale of vapes to under-age people in this country—a generation of young people who have become addicted to nicotine. I will talk about that further on in my speech.

The Government have consulted and the Bill will go through the legislative process. We will no doubt have a rigorous debate today and in the Bill Committee. It will then report to this House and then go to the House of Lords, where it will be continue to be scrutinised, and it is unacceptable that there are still people who would tie the Health Secretary's hands behind her back and slow her down when urgent action is needed to clamp down on the people who are selling nicotine to children. Those people are addicting children to nicotine. I do not understand why on earth the Trussites in the corner are trying to tie the hands of their own Health Secretary when she is trying to do the right thing by young people.

Sara Britcliffe *rose*—

Wes Streeting: Perhaps the hon. Member will tell us.

Sara Britcliffe: The hon. Member is putting me on the wrong side of this argument as a former smoker, so I would appreciate it if he had a little bit more respect. What I am trying to ask is this: why does he not agree that people who are using vaping as a substitute for smoking should be consulted on what they believe should happen through this Bill?

Wes Streeting: I do not know whether there is a problem with the speaker system in here, because this is the second time I have had an intervention after answering the question. I have already said that the Government have consulted on measures to clamp down, and I am absolutely not against the Government talking to people who, like the hon. Lady, have used vaping as a smoking cessation tool. In fact, I fully support the point she is making, which is that vaping can be a really effective tool to help smokers to quit smoking. I am in favour of that; that is good for health. If the Government want to talk to and engage with people who vape as part of the passage of this Bill, that is absolutely fine. What I am not in favour of is tying the Secretary of State's hands when she wants to do more, and more quickly, to prevent children becoming addicted to nicotine.

Victoria Atkins: Just to be clear, we will consult on this. It is a simple question that requires a simple answer: will Labour consult further?

Wes Streeting: Mr Deputy Speaker, we are now in this parallel universe where the Secretary of State is asking me, the shadow Secretary of State, whether I am going to consult on her Bill. Now, I am willing to help her out, but if she wants me to sit on that side of the Chamber and run the Department of Health and Social Care, I am ready and willing, but we need a general election to do that. I do not understand—this is just extraordinary. I feel like I am living in a parallel universe this afternoon. It was bad enough when the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk, walked in with her book and her fan club, and now we have the absurd spectacle of the Secretary of

State asking me whether I will run the consultation on her Bill. This is extraordinary. I will allow her to correct the record and save her blushes.

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman is not listening. He has been asked repeatedly whether he supports the concept of a consultation on vaping in order to ensure that these regulations are drawn up properly. He is not listening. He refuses to answer the question. We on this side of the House are clear: we want to get this right and we will consult. I am simply asking whether he will answer the questions that he has been asked.

Wes Streeting: Honestly, Mr Deputy Speaker, you just can't help some people. I am trying to help the Secretary of State out and defend her against her own side, and now, to curry favour with them, she has turned on me. Now I know what it is like being in the Conservative party. This is like a 1922 committee meeting—absolutely absurd.

For the final time, let me just explain the situation we find ourselves in today. The Secretary of State is currently in government. This is her Bill. She is taking it through Parliament. She is perfectly able to run a consultation. I will support her in running a consultation, if that is the support she needs. [*Interruption.*] I am so pleased. If only I had known it was that easy. If all she needed was a bit of moral support from me to run the consultation, then you go, comrade—don't you worry; I have got your back, and it is absolutely fine.

I am trying to be helpful to the Secretary of State this afternoon, but I just have to say to her that I am not sure that the best way to persuade her colleagues was to invoke the great cigar chomper, Winston Churchill. Some have estimated that Churchill went through 160,000 cigars in his time. Indeed, on one occasion, at a lunch with the then King of Saudi Arabia, Churchill was told that no smoking or drinking would be permitted in the royal presence. He responded:

“If it was the religion of His Majesty to deprive himself of smoking and alcohol, I must point out that my rule of life prescribed as an absolutely sacred rite smoking cigars and also the drinking of alcohol before, after and, if need be, during all meals and in the intervals between them.”

I appreciate the Health Secretary's efforts, but I fear that Lord Soames was probably on to something when he said that his grandfather certainly would not have approved of this Bill.

Just before any Conservative Members decide to wage yet another culture war and accuse me of talking down one of Britain's greatest Prime Ministers, I would just add to the historical record that it was thanks to the Labour party that it was Winston Churchill, not Lord Halifax, who became the leader of our country at a crucial time, and thank goodness that he did. Nevertheless, I do commend the Secretary of State on a good effort—she was close, but no cigar. Anyway, let us go back to the economic arguments of the Bill.

Vicky Ford: I want to go back to the point about consultation. I think that the hon. Gentleman has agreed that, for people who smoke cigarettes, moving on to vapes can be helpful. What he may not know is that people who have moved on to those vapes tell us that, if they are unflavoured and just taste of nicotine, they taste revolting. That is why many vapes are flavoured. That is why my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn

(Sara Britcliffe) may be so concerned about making sure that people's views are listened to before flavours are removed from the market.

It appears to me that the hon. Gentleman did not get that point, because he was refusing to believe that any such consultation was important. Therefore, out of respect to the people who use these products to stop smoking, can he confirm again that if he is in government at the time, soon after this Bill is passed, he will consult people and listen to their views before banning the products they use?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her intervention. I think she makes a perfectly sensible point, actually, and I am perfectly open to lobbying from Conservative Members on how a Labour Government will behave after the general election—she seems to think it is a foregone conclusion, but I certainly do not; we will be working hard for every vote. I can reassure her that our concern has been about children becoming addicted to nicotine. In relation to adult use of vapes as a tool for stopping smoking, I think she makes an absolutely reasonable point about flavourless vaping, and of course she is right that we need to ensure that we get the regulation right on that so that we do not unwittingly deter people from stopping smoking. However, as I will come on to talk about when I come to the vaping section of the Bill, there is no excuse whatsoever for the kinds of flavourings and marketing of vapes that we have seen, which I believe have been deliberately and wilfully designed to addict young people to what is, let us not forget, a harmful substance. I make that very clear.

Anyway, back to the Bill—someone has to defend it, and I get the sense that there are not going to be too many on the Government side, so I will have a go at doing what the Prime Minister is too weak to do and take on the arguments of his own party. They say that the progressive ban on smoking is unconservative. Let me tell them what is unconservative: the heaviest tax burden in 70 years, and it will get heavier if we do not act to prevent ill health.

If we continue down the road that the Conservatives have put us on, with more and more people suffering, falling sick and falling out of the workforce, we will not just be letting those people down; we will all be paying a heavy price for it too. The costs of sickness and disability benefits are due to rise on the Government's watch, from £65 billion this year to over £90 billion by the end of the next Parliament.

The budget for the NHS is £165 billion this year, and the health service is not coping with existing demands. If society continues to get less healthy, those demands will only rise. If the health service and our welfare service are to be made sustainable for the future, then we must act to prevent ill health in the first place. What better way to do that than by wiping out the leading cause of cancer? It is not just our public finances that are held back by ill health; so too is our economy.

Alexander Stafford: I am trying to follow the hon. Gentleman's argument to its logical conclusion. He talks about substances that are bad—addictive and harmful to people's health—and have a huge impact on the NHS through those costs, but there are so many more things that are in fact worse for health. Sugar and

salt are highly addictive. Does this mean that Labour's plan is to ban foods with high levels of salt or sugar? Logically, that is the next step, and therefore, if we need to protect the NHS and cut costs, we should be banning anything that is slightly bad for us, rather than actually taking a better enjoyment of life and saying, "A little bit of what you fancy every now and again is okay, and good for your mental health."

Wes Streeting: I think that is extraordinary. I do not think that smoking is slightly harmful; I think it is the single biggest cause of cancer, and I think that the costs to people's health, to our national health service and to our economy are enormous. This sort of argument—that if we ban smoking for young people, we have to ban everything else—is absurd. I think that the Secretary of State just pointed out the absurdity of it when she pointed to a whole range of harmful things in our country that are already banned.

Let me put the question back to the libertarian wing in the corner of the Chamber. Will the new modern Conservative party not ban anything? Will we have a libertarian dystopia in which people are free to do whatever they want in the name of liberty? *[Interruption.]* I am just trying to help the Secretary of State by taking on the libertarians in the corner. I would be very sad if she wants me to give in to them but, with 187,000 people on the waiting list in the local area of the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford), I think we should do something about it.

Sir Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I proudly call myself a libertarian, because I believe in the fundamental value of freedom of decision making. On what we should and should not ban, I would argue there is a very substantial difference between banning class A and class B drugs, which do immense harm in all our communities, and banning tobacco. We already struggle to stop the former, so why on earth would we try to create and police a huge black market in the latter?

Wes Streeting: I admire the right hon. Gentleman for sticking to his convictions as a libertarian in making that case, even though I strongly disagree with him, but how far does his commitment to libertarianism go? He is defending the right of our country's children to become addicted to nicotine for the rest of their life, which is an extraordinary argument. There are 356,000 people in his local area on NHS waiting lists. Does he want a future where that gets worse and the disease burden and cost pressures rise? When he was in government, the low-tax Conservatives crashed our economy and sent people's mortgages through the roof, and rents, bills and the tax burden rose. That is their record. I wish he would do more to stand up for his low-tax convictions than his libertarian desire that children growing up in our country today should become addicted to nicotine. I have to respectfully disagree with him.

Compared with three years ago, half a million more people are out of work due to long-term sickness. People's careers are being ruined by illnesses that prevent them from contributing to Britain's economic success. We cannot build a healthy economy without a healthy society. Not only is there a moral argument for backing this progressive ban, based on the countless lives ruined by smoking and our shared determination to make

[*Wes Streeting*]

sure that children growing up in Britain today will not die as a result of smoking, but there is an economic argument, too.

It is certainly true that vaping is less harmful than smoking and is a useful smoking cessation tool, but vapes are harmful products none the less. In the past few years, entirely on the Conservatives' watch, a new generation of children have become hooked on nicotine. An estimated quarter of a million children vape today, and there is no doubt that this is the result of vaping companies' decision to target children. On any high street in the country today, people can buy brightly coloured vapes and e-liquids with names such as "Vimto Breeze" and "Mango Ice". They are designed, packaged, marketed and deliberately sold to children. The effect of this new nicotine addiction on our country's young people should trouble us all.

Ms Lyn Brown: A couple of years back, Newham did a survey and discovered that 4% of year 6 children—that is 10 and 11-year-olds—had already vaped. I met Community Links in Canning Town in January, and it has been working on projects to tackle misinformation. Its students explained to me that they and their friends have been encouraged to believe that vaping is somehow safe and will not cause them the same problems with nicotine. Surely we can all agree that the voices of young people need to be heard and that they need to be encouraged and assisted to tackle the misinformation about vaping that is clearly out there.

Wes Streeting: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend, and I am very familiar with Community Links, which does brilliant work. We should take the voices of children and young people seriously—the right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) made that point earlier.

Teachers monitor school toilets where children congregate to vape. Kids are making up excuses to leave their classroom in order to satisfy their nicotine cravings, and children in primary school, aged 9 or younger, have ended up in hospital because of the impact of vaping. Paediatric chest physicians report that children are being put in intensive care units for conditions such as lung bleeding, lung collapse and lungs filling up with fat. One girl who started vaping at school told the BBC that she has

"no control over it...I start to get shaky and it's almost all I can think of."

The question that must be asked of Conservative Members should not be whether they will take action today, but what has taken them so long. In 2021, Labour supported an amendment to the Health and Care Act 2022 to ban the branding and marketing of vapes to appeal to children—Conservative MPs voted it down. In 2023, my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) led a debate on an Opposition day motion on the same proposed ban—once again, Conservative MPs failed to support it. Thanks to their delay in acting against this, and thanks to their awful, shocking complacency, thousands more children have taken up vaping and become addicted to nicotine. Can the Health Secretary tell the House whether the Government's delay in acting against youth vaping had anything to do with the £350,000 donation her party

received from the boss of a major vaping company that sells vapes with flavours such as "Blue Razz Lemonade" and "Strawberry Mousse"?

We are an ageing society facing rising chronic disease. We are approaching these challenges with an NHS already in the worst crisis in its history, with the longest waiting lists and lowest patient satisfaction on record, 121,000 staff vacancies across the health service and 14,000 fewer hospital beds than in 2010. If we do not act today to ease the pressures coming down the track, they threaten to overwhelm and even bankrupt the health service.

Prevention is better than cure. This progressive ban must be the beginning of a decade in which we shift the focus of healthcare in this country from sickness to prevention, which is mission critical to making sure the NHS can be there for us in the next 75 years, just as it has been there for us in the past 75 years.

If the Government are serious about taking on this challenge, Labour has many more plans that they can adopt before they finally call the general election. They could adopt our children's health plan to give every child a healthy start to life. They could ban junk food ads aimed at kids so that children are not targeted by unhealthy food. They could tackle the mental health crisis facing young people, with support in every school, hubs in every community, and 8,500 more mental health professionals to cut the disgracefully long waiting times for treatment.

They could treat the 152,000 children who have been on NHS waiting lists for more than 18 weeks, ending long waits for children for good. We will do it by providing 2 million more operations, and by providing evening and weekend appointments to beat the Tory backlog. We will have supervised toothbrushing in schools to tackle the moral emergency of children needing to have their rotting teeth pulled out, which is the No. 1 reason why children aged six to 10 end up in hospital. We will have breakfast clubs in every primary school so that kids start the day with hungry minds, not hungry bellies. We will digitise the red book, making sure that all kids are up to date on their checks and vaccines. And we will once again put an end to measles in this country, after it has been allowed to return on the Government's watch.

We want the next generation to be chasing their dreams, not a dentist appointment. They should aspire to reach their potential, not to reach a doctor. Labour's plan is to make sure that today's children are part of the healthiest generation that has ever lived, and this ban is just the start.

The Prime Minister may be too weak to whip his MPs to vote for this important Bill, but Labour will put country first and party second. We will resist the temptation to play games on votes. Instead, we will go through the Lobby to make sure this legislation is passed so that today's young people are even less likely to smoke than they are to vote Conservative.

I commend this Bill to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I remind everyone that there is a lot of interest in this debate, particularly among Government Members, so I ask speakers not to stray too much beyond seven minutes. I call Liz Truss.

2.49 pm

Elizabeth Truss (South West Norfolk) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I am not speaking in this debate because I love smoking, although I have voted against every single smoking prohibition since I have been a Member of Parliament. I am speaking today because I am very concerned that the policy that has been put forward is emblematic of a technocratic establishment in this county that wants to limit people's freedom. That is a problem.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Elizabeth Truss: I will not give way to the hon. Lady—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] I will not give way. I will give exactly as much opportunity as the Opposition gave me to talk about my private Member's Bill, which I shall come on to later.

The problem is that the instinct of this establishment, which is reflected in cross-party consensus in the Chamber, is to believe that it—that the Government—is better at making decisions for people than people themselves. I absolutely agree that that is true for the under-18s. It is very important that we protect people while they are growing up until they have decision-making capability. However, I think the whole idea that we can protect adults from themselves is hugely problematic and effectively infantilises people. That is what has been going on. We are seeing, not just on tobacco but on sugar, alcohol and meat, a group of people who want to push an agenda which is about limiting personal freedom. I think that that is fundamentally wrong.

I go out canvassing a lot in my Norfolk constituency. People raise all kinds of issues with me on the doorstep. They are concerned about immigration. They are concerned about the cost of energy. They are concerned about the rise of China. They want to support Ukraine. Not a single voter has ever said to me, "My big concern is adults smoking." This proposal has not come from people—our constituents—talking to us. It has come from a group of people who, by and large, work in a professional capacity pushing these policies. When my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) was Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, this proposal was sitting on her desk, so it is not new. I am pleased to say that she put it in the bin, but unfortunately since then it seems to have been pulled out of the bin and resuscitated. My real fear is that this is not the final stage that the health police want to push.

Wes Streeting: Health police!

Elizabeth Truss: They are the health police, and people are concerned about this. They want to be able to make their own decisions about what they eat, what they drink and how they enjoy themselves. If the hon. Gentleman does not understand that, I suggest that he starts listening to the public.

What I also find extraordinary is the fact that almost four weeks ago I put a private Member's Bill to Parliament to ban under-18s from being able to access puberty blockers and cross-sex hormones in the private sector and on the national health service. Children have been

taking those drugs, and that has had life-changing effects on them. They have prevented them from having their own children, created problems with their physique and their bodies, and damaged their health.

Not only did the Labour party not support my private Member's Bill but its Members talked and filibustered—they talked about ferrets—so much that I was not even able to speak. These are the same people who are saying that in future we should ban cigarettes for 30-year-olds, yet they will not vote to ban puberty blockers and cross-sex hormones for the under-18s. Thank goodness that Hilary Cass has come forward with her report. I welcome the support of the Health and Social Care Secretary for that report, but that is what we should be legislating on. We should be legislating on implementing the recommendations in the Hilary Cass report to prevent real danger to our children, rather than a virtue-signalling piece of legislation about protecting adults from themselves in future.

I am afraid that too many Members of Parliament have gone along with this orthodoxy. I am not surprised that that is the case for Labour and Liberal Democrat Members, who generally do not support freedom. They believe that the Government know best—the state knows best—and we understand that. I am disappointed, however, that a Conservative Government has introduced the Bill. The only other country in the world where such a Bill was brought forward was New Zealand, under a very left-wing Prime Minister. That Bill has now been reversed under the new conservative Government in New Zealand. I have a message for my colleagues on this side of the House. If people want to vote for finger-wagging, nannyng control freaks, there are plenty of them to choose from in the Opposition, and that is the way they will vote. If people want to have control over their lives, if they want to have freedom, that is why they vote Conservative. We have to stand by our principles and ideals even if—

Wes Streeting: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Elizabeth Truss: No, I am not giving way to the party that filibustered on my Bill and stopped us taking action to protect children. That was a disgrace.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Did my right hon. Friend hear the comments of Sir Chris Whitty on the radio this morning? He refused to apologise for or explain the failures of the NHS to deal with the issue of puberty blockers while, at the same time, he professed great support for these oppressive measures which are before the House.

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend makes absolutely the right point. There are double standards in this debate. My view is that it is absolutely right that we protect the under-18s from these potential dangers before they have full decision-making capability, but we should allow adults to exercise that freedom. It seems to me that the medical establishment, the national health service and others working in the health industry have unfortunately been captured by this gender ideology, which is preventing them from seeing the truth of what is happening. That is why the Cass report is welcome. If only the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) had shown the same level of interest in dealing with the issue of

[Elizabeth Truss]

young people and puberty blockers that he has shown in pursuing his crusade against smoking—he was not saying this a few years ago.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): As my right hon. Friend will know, I was in the Chamber on that Friday listening to the filibustering, and was unable to contribute to the important debate on puberty blockers. I support her Bill and am grateful for the Cass report.

In reality, there are some products that are banned for adults—things such as cocaine and heroin—so society as a whole has made a choice that some products must be banned for adults as well as children. It is about where we draw the line. My right hon. Friend said that people should be able to do whatever they want as adults, but in fact unless we want to liberalise laws on drugs and allow people to have heroin, cocaine and everything else—perhaps she does—a line has to be drawn somewhere, and it is just a case of where.

Elizabeth Truss: I certainly do not support the liberalisation of those drugs. We know that people who become addicted to heroin and cocaine are a huge danger to other people and to their families; it destroys society. That is not the level of danger that tobacco poses, so those are very different scenarios.

I will come to my conclusion, because I know that a lot of people want to speak in the debate. What I ask is that Members do not just follow the instructions of the health lobby. We have heard about what the chief medical officer says. I know from being a Government Minister that there are often schemes pushed by officials and civil servants because, fundamentally, there is a belief that government knows best. I want Members of Parliament to think not just about what happens if we ban smoking for people who are over the age of 18, but about the implications for shopkeepers who have to identify whether people are the right age. Will it mean that people have to carry ID into shops with them into their 40s? What are the practical implications? It is a very dangerous precedent to start saying that some adults can have the freedom to smoke and some cannot. That is a fundamental problem. It is fundamentally unconservative, it is unliberal and I will not be supporting the Bill.

Wes Streeting: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for Members of this House to attack individual officers, such as the chief medical officer, or the civil service more generally, when they cannot answer back? Ultimately, advisers advise and Ministers decide. If people do not like Government policy or its consequences, they should take responsibility as Ministers and not attack officials who cannot answer back.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I will allow that to rest on the record.

3.1 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I am pleased to speak here today in favour of the Bill, part 2 of which specifically relates to Scotland, because smoking is the leading cause of preventable death in both Scotland and the UK. We know that, so we are surely duty bound

to act and prevent harms. To be clear from the outset, I want us to help people to stop smoking. Smoking cessation, as well as preventing future harm, requires our action.

Dr Ian Walker, executive director of policy at Cancer Research UK, has correctly pointed out that nothing will have a bigger impact on reducing the number of preventable deaths in the UK than ending smoking. I will not go into detail about the terrible reality of the health impacts of smoking. We have heard about them already today, particularly powerfully from those who have worked directly in the medical environment. We have seen significant successes where we have acted on smoking in the past. I remember when the ban on smoking in indoor public spaces came into effect in Scotland, a first in the UK. It was a bit controversial, but not for long. It has undoubtedly hugely improved our environment and, importantly, our health outcomes. We have seen an important decrease in the numbers of smokers, but let us be real—there are still far too many lives being destroyed by smoking.

I am very glad that Scotland has been in front of the curve on these issues, whether that be with the indoor ban, the overhaul of tobacco sale and display, the ambitious goal of a smoke-free Scotland by 2034 or an issue that I have often spoken about here, the consultation on disposable vapes. The direction of travel is welcome. The SNP welcomes the collaborative step towards creating a smoke-free generation. It is not just us—the public are looking for action too. Action on Smoking and Health tells us that the largest poll of public opinion conducted to date—over 13,000 adults were polled—found 69% in support, including over half of all current smokers.

I watched with some despair—a little bit like I watched some of the proceedings in the House today—media interviews this morning where the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) said some of the things she repeated here in the Chamber. She said:

“I don’t know why this legislation is being brought forward”.

I would have thought that was pretty obvious really, but let me help her with that: it is to stop people dying. She then said, as she has again during the debate, that this is “unconservative” legislation. To be fair, I know absolutely nothing about being a Conservative and I am very much OK with that, but what a bizarre statement. Surely regardless of our varying political views, we can look at the health impacts of smoking and say they are not the future we want, and not the damage, harm and heartbreak we want for future generations.

Let us be clear that any arguments put forward about personal choice or personal freedom make no sense at all when we are talking about children and a highly addictive substance. Smoking is not a free choice; it is an addiction. Nicotine is a horribly addictive substance. That is why this is a positive and necessary move, and one widely welcomed, including by Asthma and Lung UK. That organisation points to the significant harm to future generations if we do not act now, and highlights the enormous cost to the NHS if we do not take this preventative action when we have the opportunity to do so.

Scottish Government Public Health Minister Jenni Minto MSP has welcomed the Bill, pointing out that Scotland has been a world leader on a range of tobacco control measures. While there has been a steady reduction

in the proportion of people smoking, we know it still damages lives and kills more than 8,000 people a year in Scotland. If we do not act, we know perfectly well what the impact of that inaction will be.

We also know that smoking causes and exacerbates health inequalities, which is exactly why we need to have a tobacco-free Scotland. Indeed, Mark Rowland, chief executive of the Mental Health Foundation, points out:

“Smoking harms disproportionately affect those with poor mental health and stopping smoking has been shown to be as effective as anti-depressants. The Tobacco and Vapes Bill is a once in a generation opportunity to prevent the known mental and physical harms that smoking causes and regulate commercial interests from undermining the health of future generations.”

Asthma and Lung UK notes that the harms of tobacco are not equally distributed. In fact, smoking is responsible for half of the difference in life expectancy between the richest and poorest in society. That generational nature of tobacco addiction means that children born today to parents who smoke are four times as likely to take up smoking themselves and to find it harder to quit. So the impact of smoking in terms of generational inequality and harm is clear and known, and we should aim to change that.

I am grateful to Asthma and Lung UK, and to the many other groups that sent me briefing materials. The breadth and range of organisations, including many medical and health groups, that have been in touch to urge me to support improvements in health and to stop future generations becoming addicted to tobacco, is very interesting and speaks to the wide spectrum of those determined to stop this harm, including, as we have heard, a majority of the public and retailers.

I would like to spend a little time talking about vapes, particularly disposable vapes. To nobody’s surprise, I am going to be positive in my support for any and all measures to arrest the tidal wave of children vaping, which should absolutely chill us all. The health impacts on children are terrifying, and that is only the ones we know about. My view is very firmly that all disposable vapes should be banned now, immediately. We should deal with the utmost urgency with the significant harms these devices are causing to our environment and to eye-watering numbers of children. Which of us can seriously say they are confident it is not their children? Members are deluding themselves if they believe that is the case.

Dr Caroline Johnson: As the hon. Lady knows, as we worked on this subject together, I brought forward a ten-minute rule Bill to ban disposable vapes last year. The measures in that Bill do not form part of the legislation today, because this is health legislation, but the banning of disposable vapes forms part of a statutory instrument that has been brought forward as environmental legislation. Does she welcome that?

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful for the hon. Lady’s intervention. As she knows, it is important for us to look at disposable vapes in the round, including their devastating environmental effects as well as the terrible impacts they have on the health of our young people. Whichever angle we look from, these are devices of which we have no need and that we should get rid of as soon as possible, before they cause any more harm.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The proliferation of vapes has happened almost overnight. Does my hon. Friend share the concerns of my constituent, who runs a newsagent and tobacconist, that he is holding the fort on legislation about the sale of tobacco, yet vapes are not subject to the same controls? He may refuse somebody because he does not think they are of age to buy a vape, but he finds they just go down the street to purchase it at another shop that does not have the controls and responsibilities that he has as a tobacco salesperson.

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that important point. I can understand the concerns of her constituent; these devices are far too accessible and far too easily available. They are in all of our schools and on all of our high streets. We need to open our eyes to the damage that is being done. ASH Scotland does great work in that regard. It tells us that, in Scotland, data from the health behaviour in school-aged children survey showed that current e-cigarette use—that means those who have used them in the last 30 days—among 15-year-olds increased from 7% in 2018, which I would have thought was scary enough, to a horrifying 25% in 2022. Obviously we are a bit beyond that now, so I wonder exactly what the figure is, but we have heard enough in the Chamber today to know that, whatever that current figure is, it should cause us grave concern.

These products are designed to be attractive. They are undoubtedly attractive—we have all seen them. They are disposable, so young people can chuck them before their parents find out, they are pocket-money prices, and they are appealing—green gummy bear flavour, anyone? In fact, the green gummy bear flavoured one is on sale for £1.50, which is a disgrace. Vapes should not be accessible in that way, and should certainly not be sold at £1.50. They could not be designed any more obviously to attract young people. Very often, we are talking about children who have never smoked, but who are now getting hooked on these vapes and getting hooked on nicotine. There is also the worry about the unknown harms that vapes cause to their bodies and their health. The sooner that we can change all of that the better.

I also have a personal gripe: vapes being advertised via sports. There is no reason for that—no justification at all. Yes, I am looking at Blackburn Rovers among others. When I raised the matter previously, Blackburn Rovers, based in the vaping capital of the UK, said:

“At no point during our long-standing relationship has the idea that the Totally Wicked brand might appeal disproportionately to children been raised, and we have seen no evidence to suggest that our sponsorship has encouraged an uptake of vaping among children.”

Well, I am raising it, and raising it again. I urge all sports clubs—because there are others—to have serious thought on this. We want to see our sporting heroes as positive influences on our young people and their health and wellbeing.

To be clear, I support measures to help people stop smoking. It is hard to do and all help is welcome, but that help does not come in the form of candy-coloured, candy-flavoured, pocket money-priced disposable vapes. Let us deal seriously with smoking cessation. Let us deal seriously with the terrible harms caused to our young people by disposable vapes, and let us have the backbone to take the chance now to stop smoking killing so many of our loved ones.

[Kirsten Oswald]

I wish to end by reflecting on the words of William Roberts, chief executive of the Royal Society For Public Health, who said:

“Smoking continues to cut lives short, killing up to two in three long-term users, and placing significant strain on an already overstretched health and social care system. Protecting future generations from the dangers of tobacco is vital if we want to build a healthier future. It is vital that the Bill passes and MPs of all political stripes put prevention at the heart of public policy when it comes to protecting our health.”

I sincerely hope that we do.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Let me just remind Members of the seven-minute guidance.

3.13 pm

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I start with a spoiler alert: I will be voting to give the Tobacco and Vapes Bill a Second Reading this evening. As we might say, prevention is the new cure. I will not spend my time reading out the screeds of statistics that we have already heard, but the bottom line is that smoking products are the only product on sale legally in our country today that—if you follow the instructions—will kill you. Both Labour and Conservative Governments have acted in the past, and we have seen smoking rates tumble as a result. It is now time to finish the job, and this Bill can be part of that.

Here is where I am coming from. We talk a lot about the pressures on the NHS. Indeed, there have been some new waiting list figures published while we have been away. We talk about public satisfaction—colleagues will be aware of the latest British social attitudes survey last month. We talk endlessly about systems, budgets and staffing, which is all quite proper. They are all issues that we face, and my Health and Social Care Committee does not duck any of them.

We can increase the budget, and we have done so hugely. The NHS in England has never had more money. We can put in a place a properly funded workforce plan, as my Committee called for—and we have. We can produce credible recovery plans for urgent and emergency care, primary care and elective waiting lists, and the Government, to their credit, have done all of those things. We can make use of a much wider workforce—Pharmacy First is a good example—but the truth is that demand continues to outstrip supply, and we cannot continue to increase the health budget faster than our economy is growing. We have to think long-term about population preventive health.

For me, there is no more obvious and glaring candidate for healthcare gains from prevention than action against smoking. When looking at this legislation, I ask not whether we want to finish the job on smoking, or whether it is right to save tens of thousands of lives lost to cancer, heart disease and stroke by doing that—I lost both my parents to cancer before I was 50—but whether the proposed measures aimed at creating a smoke-free generation will actually work. I also ask: how strong is the resolve of Ministers to swiftly use the powers they are taking in the Bill to tackle the use of vapes among children? An issue often overlooked is whether we will we keep the focus on the current smokers we must also help to quit.

Modelling from the Department shows us that if the age of sale were increased by one year every year, as proposed in the Bill, smoking rates among 14 to 30-year-olds are likely to be zero by 2050. I have said this since the Prime Minister announced his intention to bring forward these measures in his conference speech last year, and he deserves so much credit for bringing this change to the House. The Government must win the argument on this as well as the vote, now that the Bill is before Parliament. The Secretary of State, who is no longer in her place, did that today, and I pay credit to the shadow Secretary of State for his part in that.

I wish to touch on an issue that we have already heard of today. The fact is that at some future point we will have a situation in which a 50-year-old can legally smoke while a 49-year-old cannot. There is no getting away from that. That is a possible scenario for sure and, yes, it is rather inelegant, but it also misses the very point of the smoke-free ambition at the heart of the Bill. The clue is in the name: smoke free. The Bill does not criminalise existing smokers, and it ensures that the purchase of tobacco by those under the legal age of sale will not be criminalised. Compliance will be the responsibility of the business, as is the case with the current age-of-sale laws in England. The Bill makes it illegal to sell tobacco products to anyone who is born on or after new year’s day 2009. That includes my 13-year-old son, William. By passing this legislation, the state is saying to him that it is not okay to start smoking when he reaches 18—I think that when we look back we will ask how we ever said it was—and by doing so my son never becomes that 49-year-old. End of story.

We are told that raising the age of sale will fuel the black market, and the next generation of smokers will pick up the habit via illicit sales. A comprehensive anti-smuggling strategy, updated over time, has succeeded in halving the illicit market share from 22% to 11%. I welcome the fact that the anti-smuggling strategy of Border Force and His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has been updated in the light of this proposed legislation. Am I just being hopeful in thinking this will work? Select Committee Chairs do not just do hope; they do evidence. I do not think I am just being hopeful. When the age of sale was raised from 16 to 18 in 2007, the illicit market did not increase.

Of course, all this—and, as I have said, we must continue to give help to current smokers to quit—needs funding. I welcome the investment of £70 million a year for the next five years into stop-smoking services, but that is a lot of money, so I cannot for the life of me see why Ministers do not look again at the Khan review call for a “polluter pays” principle in the form of a tobacco industry levy. Let us make that a reality.

Let me turn to vapes. The Bill gets 10 out of 10 for intention, but on planned enforceable action I am not so sure, because we just do not know enough. Increasingly, the genie is already out of the bottle—or out of the unknown, untested, bubble-gum flavoured canister—when it comes to vaping, but the kids are not alright on this. Let us make no mistake: users are mostly youngsters, who these days will seldom even think of trying the fags. Vapes are no longer only or even principally aimed at adults who are trying to quit cigarettes. Just when

smoking by children was decreasing, vaping by children has started to rise hugely. Between 2018 and 2020, vaping rates doubled.

The benefit of vaping as a safer option for those who currently smoke tobacco is clear, but it is also increasingly obvious that for those who have never smoked it is certainly not risk free. The World Health Organisation has said that vapes are harmful. Schools are worried, as colleagues will hear from any headteacher in their constituencies. In my Committee's oral evidence hearing on vaping, our witnesses repeatedly raised concerns about the health and behavioural effects of vaping-led nicotine consumption and addiction in schools, including on concentration in class.

The long-term effects of vaping are simply not known, so I cautiously welcome the fact that the Bill takes powers to crack down on youth vaping through regulations to restrict flavours, point-of-sale displays in retail outlets and packaging. However, I cannot go further, because the Bill states throughout:

“The Secretary of State may by regulations make provision”, and by virtue of the fact that we do not have those regulations before us, it is hard to get a sense of their scope. In winding up, will the Minister update the House on when we might see those regs?

I am pleased to see the new excise duty on vaping products to discourage non-smokers and young people from vaping. I know that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will lead on the ban on the sale and supply of disposable vapes, and that the draft Environmental Protection (Single-use Vapes) (England) Regulations 2024 were out for consultation until the end of March. Again, I would be grateful if the Minister updated the House on when that legislation will be taken forward and whether the Bill must first receive Royal Assent? Obviously, I understand the environmental case for a ban on disposables, but I have concerns about us taking away a ladder for adult smokers to climb down. We must be super careful not to tip adults who use vapes to quit cigarettes back to smoking by taking away options.

There has been some talk of a retail licensing scheme—we heard the Secretary of State refer to it earlier. We could perhaps disregard such a scheme if we went down the road of a prescription-only model for vapes so that they are used only under clinical guidance to help adults smokers to quit. In truth, I do not think our current regulatory environment, courtesy of the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, makes it easy to bring a prescription vape to market. The speed of innovation in the sector alongside the slowness of regulation would make it a real challenge for providers, and unless Ministers address that, I do not see how we advance that cause.

We will hear today—we certainly have in the media—about banning things. We will hear about the nanny state, and perhaps even an echo from the distant past about Anglo-Saxon England. Well, as the MP representing the capital of the former Kingdom of Wessex, I do not hold much truck with that. I prefer to listen—fool that I am—to the four chief medical officers of our nation, who say:

“To be pro-individual choice should mean being against the deliberate addiction of children, young people and young adults to something that will harm them, potentially fatally.”

I have always believed that in a publicly funded healthcare system we have a right and, indeed, a responsibility to act on public health, because it becomes everyone's problem when we do not. Conservatives for whom a smaller state is their thing—although I can never pinpoint which part of the state they do not want their constituents to have—should be right behind a healthier society, because it is one that needs the state less, relies on the state less and costs the state less.

In the light of the important points that I have tried to cover, I will vote to give this important and historic Bill a Second Reading.

3.23 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): I support the Bill in principle, and will vote for its Second Reading later, because it is an anti-smoking measure. Smoking is the forgotten killer of our society, and the Bill contains initiatives against child vaping that I and others have been urging for some time. Let us not be in doubt: the Bill will pass, but it will pass with Labour votes, so I will direct my remarks to its shortcomings.

The Bill is late, it is slapdash and it makes several big mistakes. It seems to have more to do with the Prime Minister's legacy than with the need for effective interventions against smoking. Disposable vapes arrived in this country and started the youth vaping epidemic during pandemic lockdowns, the last of which finished three years ago. The Prime Minister is concerned about it only now, with his time in No. 10 drawing to a close but very little to show for it. The Government were too slow and slack to get out in front of the issue. Even after three years, they do not have precise proposals for vape regulation to put before the House. As others have said, no consultations have been conducted and nobody is sure what exactly needs to be done—although we all know that something must be done. Children vaping, fake vapes, fake cigarettes that are even more harmful than real ones—these are public health disasters, but they are already illegal, so will not be deterred any more than they are now.

What does the Bill do for the 6.4 million existing smokers? Nothing. In 2019, the Government set a target of bringing prevalence down to 5% by 2030. That was a stretch target and was to be applauded—it was ambitious, but it could have been done. Instead, the Government have dropped all mention of it, and are covering their tracks and distracting us with the generational smoking ban, which will do nothing to help those who already smoke.

What we really need is relentless, thorough and inescapable enforcement, including massive boosts to the resources of trading standards, so that local councils can blast the crime gangs out of their neighbourhoods and keep them out. The fact is that most vapes sold to our children are already illegal. It is illegal for them to be sold to under-18s, to have tanks exceeding 2 ml and 600 puffs, to not carry the right warnings, and to be sold without MHRA approval. While enforcement remains feeble, the disposable ban will make little difference.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): I am listening closely to what the hon. Gentleman says because I share his passion for driving cowboys out of this industry. Does he recognise my observation that those in the industry, and particularly small shop owners, who are quite often

[*Adam Afriyie*]

from ethnic minority groups, are equally keen to have greater levels of enforcement because they want to drive the cowboys out as much as we do?

Mr Sharma: The hon. Gentleman jumps to a point that I will cover later in my remarks.

Most of the vapes being sold to our children are already illegal. While enforcement remains feeble, the disposable ban will make little difference. The Government are offering £10 million per year for three years to trading standards. That would be good if there were only 20 trading standards departments across the UK; unfortunately, there are 197, so the offer is pure tokenism. Under the generational smoking ban, the Government want to make every shop worker a target for every shopper, just to cover their own failure. Shopkeepers in my constituency are greatly concerned about the pressure this ban will place on them as retailers and on their staff. Retail workers already suffer unacceptable behaviour from customers on a daily basis, which will only get worse. Age-restricted sales are the biggest cause of violence against staff, apart from shoplifting. This ban places often disadvantaged workers at threat of risky and dangerous working environments.

Smoking is a major driver of health inequality. Disproportionate numbers of sufferers of smoking-related diseases are from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Many are dyed-in-the-wool, hardcore smokers. They should give up—they know that—but most of them are not able to do so. None of them thinks that smoking is healthy or safe, so it is urgent that wherever possible they are helped to transition to less dangerous forms of nicotine such as vaping, nicotine pouches and heated tobacco products. No one alternative suits every hardcore smoker. It is an ideologically blinkered mistake to prevent future under-age smokers—those we can never stop—from accessing relatively safer heated tobacco products. I have stated before in this House the relative benefits of HTPs. I said earlier that this Bill does nothing for existing smokers; incredibly, this provision actually makes things worse for them. A pragmatic policy would have seized the potential of all these alternatives, not just vapes, and a smoke-free 2030 could have been a reality. Instead, the Government are playing with people's lives and making the perfect the enemy of the good.

Finally, the Bill also overlooks the highly carcinogenic scourges of paan and betel in the south Asian community. Only a targeted, community-specific intervention would have any effect in tackling those scourges—I have been drawing attention to them for years. We have waited years for primary legislation on tobacco, but it seems that our needs have again been overlooked, and south Asians will remain at the back of the queue for years to come.

I will support the Bill on Second Reading, but there is huge room for improvement. In particular, trading standards should be given the tools it needs to break the hold that illegal products already have on the market, and while we still have smokers, heated tobacco products should be removed from the generational ban as part of a broad range of less harmful alternatives. I must say that all those ethnic minority shopkeepers are concerned but supportive of this move; they believe that the ban should be in place, but that they should be supported. They feel strongly that at present, not enough support is

coming from the Bill and the Government. I hope that the Government will take on board some of what I have said, and that the Bill will emerge much amended on Third Reading.

3.33 pm

Sir Sajid Javid (Bromsgrove) (Con): When I was appointed Health Secretary in 2021, we were still in the midst of the pandemic. That challenging time taught us so much about the strength and resilience of our nation, but it also cast an uncomfortable light on truths that we have too often chosen to ignore. In the past, this country has been at the cutting edge of preventive healthcare, but while we have talked a good game on that issue in recent decades, in truth, we have not always delivered.

I would argue that we still face a public health emergency in this country—one that consumes 40% of the NHS budget, ensures that regional inequalities persist, and limits the life chances and opportunities of individuals right across our country. This public health emergency has many causes, and at the top of the list must be smoking, especially of cigarettes. That is why I commissioned Javed Khan to lead an independent review of smoking. I am immensely grateful to him for his excellent work and I am proud that he has led us to this legislation. The title of his report, “Making smoking obsolete”, is the right mission for us to deliver on, especially given this Government's commitment in 2019 to a smoke-free Britain.

One of the most important problems Javed Khan identifies is the dual impact of tobacco and nicotine. First, it is incredibly damaging to the health of individuals. As we have heard from so many right hon. and hon. Members, no amount of tobacco is safe. Secondly, it is corrosive of personal liberty and agency. Smoking remains the biggest single cause of preventable illness and death in this country, causing, as we have heard, some 80,000 deaths a year. Smokers are 36% more likely to be admitted to hospital and to need social care 10 years before non-smokers. It causes one in four cancer-related deaths. Behind each of these statistics is an individual life, a family and a community impacted by poorer health. It is therefore only right that we take robust action to protect future generations from these harmful products.

As Javed Khan rightly highlighted in his report, the public are often led to believe that smoking is a personal choice, whereas the reality is that nicotine is a highly addictive drug that corrodes personal agency. Four in five smokers start before the age of 20 and remain addicted for the rest of their lives. As we have heard, many people want to give up smoking, and we have heard some personal stories in the House about just how hard that has been, and how many people, sadly, do not succeed. Many struggle to break free from addiction, and the average number of attempts of those who eventually do successfully quit is 30.

I know that some hon. Members have publicly expressed their reservations about the proposal before us, and we have heard that in this debate, but can we honestly say that this drug enhances personal liberty and freedom? It is a nonsense argument. Anyone who makes that argument is choosing to stand up for big tobacco against the interests of their constituents, and to erode people's personal liberty and remove their freedom to choose by

giving them access to a drug. This drug diminishes economic freedom, and it diminishes the wealth of individuals and of our country. Its overall impact across the country is to reduce opportunity and to drive social challenges. Indeed, if cigarettes were first manufactured today, they would obviously never get through consumer product safety testing.

Given that we are where we are and given what we know, it is of course right to protect future generations from this drug and this addiction. Freedom from pain, disease and inequality is one of the greatest freedoms there is, and whether it is tackling burning injustices, levelling up or even the big society, these missions are more than compatible with the legislation before the House. This is a world-leading proposal backed by clinical evidence and supported by a strong moral cause. As surveys have shown again and again—and, again, just recently—it is strongly supported by the general public of all ages. It is the right approach to public health, it is the right approach for our country and it is more than worthy of the support of this whole House.

3.39 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): First, I want to put on record my thanks to the public health Minister the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) and the chief medical officer Sir Chris Whitty, who spent time answering my questions and those of some of my colleagues. It was a very collegiate exercise and I am grateful to the right hon. Lady. It would be good to see more of that.

The Government proposals on vapes are an absolute no-brainer and are consistent with Liberal Democrat party policy that was adopted at our conference last year, including the ban on single-use vapes on environmental grounds. Parents and teachers in St Albans are particularly concerned about the insidious marketing of vapes to young people: the colours, flavours and packaging are designed to appeal to children. Earlier in the debate the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) talked about children gathering in toilets, desperate to use their vapes. I am aware, unfortunately, of one example in my constituency where children have gathered in toilets not just to use the vapes but to take them apart to use as containers for smuggling in more dangerous substances, thereby using the vapes as a new gateway drug. I therefore entirely support the Government's proposals on the regulation of vapes.

The question of a so-called smoking ban on those aged 15 and younger, stopping them being sold cigarettes, is not so straightforward, however. For Liberal Democrats there will be a free vote on this Bill; there are some good liberal arguments to be made both for and against it. I will be supporting the measures in the Bill, but some of my colleagues have remaining liberal and practical concerns. For example, in 30 years' time how does somebody prove they are 46 and not 45 without a driver's licence or a passport? How can we prevent abuse at retailers, too? I hope the Government will be providing more reassurances to colleagues on these issues.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Member accept that that difficulty puts the onus on the retailer, who is meant to distinguish between a 45-year-old

and a 46-year-old, and if they do not do that or they do so incorrectly, they could find themselves faced with a fine? Is that fair?

Daisy Cooper: Colleagues across the House have genuine concerns about that point. I know from engagements in my constituency that a number of retailers already suffer attacks when challenging people wishing to buy other age-related products, so I hope the Government will offer reassurances about what they intend to do to tackle that.

As I have said, I will be supporting the measures in this Bill, but coming to that decision was a bit of a journey for me. My first reaction on hearing of the Bill before it was published was indignation, because the measures are just a drop in the ocean in terms of what is needed to tackle cancer. One in two of us will get cancer at some point, yet the Government have missed their targets to provide fast cancer treatment every year since 2015 and have dropped their 10-year cancer plan. What we need is research in rare cancers, outdated cancer scanners updated, cancer nurses and efforts to tackle waiting times. It would perhaps have been better if the measures in this Bill had been a single clause in a much broader Bill. To be honest, I am frustrated that so much energy is going into this Bill, which could be described as low-hanging fruit, rather than into producing a much more ambitious plan to tackle cancer more broadly. We need to see more ambition in this area.

My second reaction was the raising of my liberal hackles. Liberals are not libertarians; we do not object to all bans. Liberals support bans as a last resort, but not as a first lever. The situation here is frustrating, however: it is a bit rich that the Government are bringing this Bill forward when they have simultaneously been slashing public health budgets, including for smoking cessation programmes, since 2015. Even with the new money the Government have put into smoking cessation programmes, the funds still fall far short of 2015 levels. We also know that smoking rates among young people have dropped very quickly; they are now down to 1% and continue to drop.

Liberals do sometimes back bans when a particular product or practice causes excessive harm, and that is why I have decided to back this ban. Fundamentally, I asked myself a simple question: is this going to help reduce the overwhelming harm caused by the significantly dangerous and addictive practice of smoking? The answer is yes, it is. We know that smoking is dangerous and highly addictive. We know that smoking is the UK's biggest preventable killer, causing around one in four cancer deaths, including 64,000 in England alone. We know that 75,000 GP appointments each month are taken up by smoking-related illness. We know that smoking costs the economy £17 billion a year through smoking-related lost earnings, unemployment and early death. We know that it comes at enormous cost to our NHS, and we know that smoking rates in pregnancy vary hugely, with as many as 20% of pregnant women smoking in some parts of the country, increasing the chance of stillbirth by almost 50%. That is an incredibly stark health inequality.

Some people have suggested it could be contradictory for a liberal to support a ban on tobacco for 15-year-olds and younger while wanting to legalise cannabis, but let me say to them that they are wrong. It is entirely

[Daisy Cooper]

consistent for a liberal to want to make harmful products illegal—harmful products such as nicotine in cigarettes, skunk and products with high THC levels that can cause psychosis—while simultaneously wanting to have a legal regulated market for less harmful products such as vapes for nicotine and cannabis products with low and regulated THC levels.

In conclusion, do I think this measure is the first or best thing that the Government should be doing to tackle cancer? No. Do I think this measure is particularly ambitious? No. But do I think it is a useful step that will help us to tackle the dangerous health impacts of smoking addiction, to improve population health and to take pressure off the NHS? Personally, I do.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

I remind colleagues to stick to the guidance of seven minutes, because otherwise I will have to impose a time limit, and it might not be seven minutes, which would be annoying for everybody.

3.47 pm

Sir Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): I start my speech by saying that there are some good parts of this Bill. The banning of disposable vapes and preventing children from starting smoking or vaping is something that anyone with a brain—there are perhaps more of them on the Government Benches than on the Opposition Benches—would support. I will address my remarks to whether banning all children who are now 15 from ever smoking is the right way to stop them smoking, as well as talking about whether any Government have a mandate on removing personal liberty.

I am sorry to see the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) leaving his place, because I was about to address some remarks to him. It is unfortunate for the quality of debate to label someone standing up to ask whether this measure will be effective as someone who wants children to smoke. I am an ex-smoker and I do not want children to smoke; I just want to pass decent laws in this House to ensure that we can reduce the number of young people smoking. That is why, when I look at this ban, I question whether it will work.

I put it to the Secretary of State that 20% of young people say they have tried cannabis. Those are not my statistics, but those of the Office for National Statistics. That is twice as many as the number of young people who say that they have tried tobacco, I think within the past 30 days. If bans worked—cannabis is banned—no child would ever have tried cannabis. It is illegal not just for those who are 15, but for all of us, whatever age we are. I went to Aintree this weekend to enjoy the grand national. I was amazed that people were walking around at one of the most heavily policed events in the UK openly snorting cocaine. It is a class A drug, and the police were doing nothing about it. If bans worked and the police enforced them, no one in this country would take drugs. I therefore question whether banning people who are now 15 from ever starting smoke will work. To me, the answer is no.

I will move on to the mandate for any MP or any Government in this place to seek to bring in such a measure in advance of a general election. If Members

go to Washington and have a look at the Korean war memorial, they will walk past thousands of names—it is an extraordinary memorial—and at the end there is a bold statement: “Freedom is not free”. All the freedoms that we enjoy in this country have not been given to us; they have been fought for. People have died to ensure that we keep those freedoms.

What we are really talking about today is removing from a group of people in our society—they may be young now, but do not forget that, at the general election after next, some will be 18 and banned from smoking, while some 19-year-old voters will be able to smoke—the right ever to have the agency to make their own decisions. If we believe in freedom, we must accept that people have to be free to make bad decisions as well as good ones. If we live in a society where the only decisions that we are free to make are those that the Government tell us we are free to make, we might as well live in a socialist society—we may as well live in Russia or China. For me, freedom means the freedom to get things wrong.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making some extremely valid points. Freedom with responsibility and freedom of choice are surely what the Conservative party should stand for. We can think of all kinds of reasons to ban all kinds of things, but surely the choice of the individual should be paramount. It is not for Government to dictate to individuals.

Sir Jake Berry: My hon. Friend is quite right. That is the legal position under the law in this country if we have capacity, no matter how bad the decisions we make. Constituents have contacted me about elderly relatives who are making poor financial decisions, but because they have capacity they are free to make those decisions, albeit bad ones in some cases.

Dr Caroline Johnson: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir Jake Berry: I will not. I have given way once and want to stick to my time. I will not support the Bill, because I believe in freedom.

My second point is about mandate. The Prime Minister does not have a mandate to bring forward this legislation, and no Labour or Liberal Democrat MPs—in fact, no MPs in the House—have a mandate to vote for it, because it was not in our manifestos. We are just months away from a general election. If people believe that this measure is so important, they should put it in their manifestos. The Conservative party could put it in our manifesto and let people vote for it.

The powers that we have in this House of Commons are not ours; they are lent to us by our constituents between general elections. We are quite rightly getting to the point where we have to return those powers to our constituents and try to persuade them that we have done a good enough job to get them back. Before we start giving away their freedoms and liberties, let us at least give them the opportunity to have a say.

There is one addiction in this country that I am even more concerned about than the addiction to nicotine: the addiction of the Government to telling people what to do. I want to live in a free society where I am free to make both good and bad decisions. As people go through the Aye Lobby to support the Bill this evening—I shall be going through the No Lobby—I ask them to cast their mind back to the last time we were all washed

through the Aye Lobby together on a wave of health and science and righteous hope to keep people safe, which was during the covid pandemic.

I am proud of furlough and all sorts of things, but I regret closing schools. It was the wrong thing to do, but I was washed along on that wave. I opposed some of the covid proposals. People should look back to that and think, “That was the last time we took people’s freedoms away from them. Did we always get it right?” In my view, the answer is no. We got lots of things right, but we also made lots of mistakes. As people march through the Lobby, they should think about whether in fact they urgently need to support the Bill or whether it should wait until after a general election—we may have a different Government then, if polls are to be believed—when the British public will have at least had the question put to them.

The addiction of our Government to telling us what to do goes beyond whether we should smoke. During covid, they determined who we could go to bed with, whether we could sit in the park and read a newspaper, and whether we could go to work. We are now told how we can heat our homes and whether we can drive an older diesel car in London. Unfortunately, we live in a country where those freedoms—those freedoms that are not free—are being eroded every single year of our lives. That is not something that I am comfortable with, and it is not something that I am prepared to support.

There are good bits to the Bill, but we cannot allow the fact that good bits of legislation have been annexed to this terrible legislation, which in my view will not work, to force us to support it. The Government could bring in the vaping measures on their own, and I would support them. I just do not support the creeping ban on tobacco. When people reach the age of 18 in a free society, they must be free to choose for themselves.

I will finish with this. If Members find themselves in the No Lobby tonight—I hope I will see a few colleagues in there—they should keep in their mind that freedom is the sure possession of those alone who have the courage to defend it. In my view, by voting no tonight, we defend the freedoms of our constituents and our country. It is the right thing to do, and I look forward to seeing as many colleagues in there as possible.

3.55 pm

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is right that the Government bring forward this legislation, but I remind the House that Labour first proposed outlawing the sale of cigarettes to the next generation over a year ago. It is good to see the Government playing catch-up.

Fresh and Balance, the award-winning north-east regional programme dedicated to tobacco control, has found that 73% of adults in our region support the Government’s proposals. Its director, Ailsa Rutter, said in support of the Bill’s progress:

“Most people who smoke get addicted young... This is about giving our next generation a life free of a cancer-causing addiction which...ends-up killing 2 out of 3”.

It is very concerning that the Government are estimated to be seven years behind their 2030 smoke-free target, and not on course to meet it in the most deprived areas of our country until 2044.

I want to concentrate on one of the best tools to help smokers quit, which can contribute to the smoke-free target: vaping. Colleagues may know that I am a strong

advocate for vaping as a way for adults to quit smoking. I am also an officer of the all-party parliamentary group for responsible vaping. As such, for the past few years I have worked directly with the industry to promote vaping as an alternative for those who want to give up smoking. I grew up in a household where both parents smoked, but in recent years I have seen so many relatives and friends, including my late husband, make the switch from being heavy smokers to using—I stress this point—safe vaping products.

Every minute, someone is admitted to hospital due to smoking. Someone dies from a smoking-related death every eight minutes, and more than 6.5 million adults still smoke. Although it is not risk-free, vaping is 95% safer than smoking. However, I would never advocate that someone who did not smoke, or who had never tried to smoke, should start vaping. I stress that vapes are a tool for helping smokers to quit. It is unequivocal that under-18s should not use or have any access to vape products. Youth vaping is a major area of concern. It is shameful that in 2021 the Government voted down a Labour amendment to the Health and Care Bill.

The rise in young people using vapes is of great concern to the legitimate vaping industry in this country. Everyone realises that something needs to be done to stop this trend, especially as existing laws are not being enforced. One in three vapes sold in UK shops is estimated to be illicit, so it is imperative that the Government act against the illegal vapes market. The industry itself has put forward many good proposals to prohibit the sale of vapes to minors, halt the illegal market and support the view that vaping should be a tool for smokers to quit. The industry produced a set of proposals to amend the Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016, to ensure that packaging and marketing are regulated and not aimed at children.

I would like to share the view of the UK Vaping Industry Association, in the hope that its observations may be considered as the Bill progresses. A major concern is that the impact assessment report by the Department of Health and Social Care fails to consider the potentially detrimental effects of restriction on current vape users and smokers looking to switch. It is important that the regulatory measures are thoroughly assessed to ensure that they do not inadvertently hinder smoking cessation efforts and lead to an increase in tobacco-related harm. I support the industry’s call to include a vape retailer and distribution licensing scheme in the Bill. The industry has developed a comprehensive framework for such a scheme, which is designed to deal effectively once and for all with the issue of under-age and illicit vape sales, a situation the industry believes will only get worse given the predicted rise in black market sales as a result of the proposed ban on disposable vapes.

I make a plea for the Government to consult more closely with the industry than they have done in the past to ensure that a workable regulatory and legislative change can be made. It is worth reminding the House that, according to the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, the best estimate shows that e-cigarettes are 95% less harmful to our health than normal cigarettes and, when supported by a smoking cessation service, help more smokers to quit tobacco altogether.

4 pm

Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Sir Jake Berry) for his speech and for mentioning the word “freedom”. It is really important that we do that. I am not coming at the debate from a libertarian perspective—more of a practical one—but, in essence, I agree very much with the majority of what he said.

As an ex-smoker, I share the Prime Minister’s aim of reducing the prevalence of smoking. I never want to see anyone, especially young people, pick up this dangerous habit. It is therefore with some sadness that I rise to explain why I do not expect to follow him into the Lobby on this vote. My great reservation is that the Bill is impractical and could easily make things worse through unintended consequences. There are 5 million users of vaping products, and there is a substantial risk that restricting the use of vapes will lead to them moving back to smoking, increasing the burden on our health system.

Vaping is recognised by Public Health England as 95% safer than tobacco use. Late last year, a study by Brunel University London revealed that if half the number of adult smokers switched to vaping it would save the NHS more than £500 million a year. The potential restriction on the flavours of vapes, which the Bill gives Ministers the power over, could also have unintended consequences, as stated in the Department of Health and Social Care’s own impact assessment. Restricting vape flavours would mean around three quarters of the 1 million adults who vape could be affected in some way.

A further study, published by Bristol University, considered the impact of removing all flavours on non-smoking young people and adult smokers using vapes as a quit aid. The study found that as a result of the flavour ban, more adults would be at risk of smoking tobacco cigarettes. Flavoured vaping is a smoking cessation tool. I can testify to that from my own experience, having chosen mango flavour over the unpleasant tobacco flavour on offer in the market.

Furthermore, the illicit cigarette share of the market is officially 11%, up from 8% five years before, and has been on an upward trend over the past decade. Far higher levels of illicit produce can be found in constituencies containing less affluent areas. Dangerous, illegal and untaxed nicotine products are also easily and widely available across the country. During a test purchase exercise I attended in my constituency, we found 21 retail outlets selling harmful, illicit or counterfeit cigarettes; illicit prices as low as 35% to 45% of legal prices; illegal vapes available in up to 24 ml tank sizes, when the legal limit is 2 ml; and British packaging and safety requirements on products not followed.

The consequences are that people buying unregulated cigarettes and vapes, particularly counterfeit ones, are risking their health greatly. The profits generated are taken by criminals rather than legitimate taxpaying businesses. No excise is paid on these illicit products, illegal distribution networks are deeply embedded into the black market and the dissuasive effect of high taxation is evaded. Although penalties have been increased, the huge disparities between those for tobacco smuggling and those for smuggling drugs will continue to attract criminal gangs, because it is a relatively low-risk form of

organised crime. I believe that, sadly, the funding surge for trading standards that was announced earlier in the debate will not be sufficient to tackle those issues.

Furthermore, nothing in the Bill will help the 6.4 million existing smokers. Indeed, by treating heated tobacco products and certain types of vapes in the same way as cigarettes, it decreases the chance that those who smoke will switch to a less dangerous alternative. I would have preferred the Government to focus on the Smokefree 2030 ambition that was aimed at those existing smokers.

Finally, I believe that the Bill is unenforceable and will put undue pressures on legitimate tobacco and vaping retailers. Those points were raised with me recently by shopkeepers at a parliamentary Association of Convenience Stores event. All the shop owners who spoke to me were genuinely concerned about the violence and verbal abuse to which they would potentially be subjected for trying to enforce the age limits set by the Government, and they also felt that they would lose more revenue to shops in their areas selling illegal vapes and cigarettes.

While I believe that the Bill is well intentioned, it risks having an effect that is the reverse of what it is trying to achieve, and that is why I will reluctantly vote against it.

4.5 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Let me first put on record that I worked in respiratory medicine for 20 years before coming to this place, and every single patient I treated regretted being where he or she was. Let me also put on record my thanks to Javed Khan for his excellent report. It is important for us to follow the science and the facts in this debate, and to ensure that we take the harm reduction approach that is so necessary.

The Bill is both bold and the right thing to do. Smoking kills one person every five minutes in the UK, and kills 7.69 million people globally every year. It is a leading cause of preventable death and disability and is responsible for one in four cancer deaths, alongside heart and circulatory diseases and strokes. We must do everything we can to prevent the tobacco industry from exploiting another generation to max out its profits, leaving people financially impoverished and in poor physical health.

Public health teams need the resources that are necessary to support adults into a smoke-free future, and I echo what the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Mark Eastwood) said: we need a focus on resourcing to achieve that. In my constituency 9,100 people continue to smoke, and they deserve better. We need a targeted approach, because passive smoking is still costly to people’s lives. We know that smoking in pregnancy is harmful to the unborn; we also know that it targets the very poorest in our society, driving greater health inequalities, and affecting people with mental health conditions as well. It is urgent, indeed imperative, for the Government to turn their attention to addressing the inequalities that are seen in all areas of healthcare.

Let me now turn to the issue of vaping. York’s schools survey showed that 19 % of children had tried vaping, while 5% in the city vaped regularly. Schools are battling to stamp out the practice. While much of the detail in the Bill will be set out in secondary legislation, I urge the Government to go toe to toe with the approach

taken on tobacco products: plain packaging, health warnings, and no designer products, attractive flavours, descriptions or colours. When it comes to sales, the approach should be no less stringent, putting products out of sight and out of mind. The aim must be to create a vape-free generation too. I urge Ministers to address the reasons why Gen Z have turned to vaping on a large scale, to develop the interventions that are needed to help them make better choices, and to expose the blatant exploitation by vape companies that profit from the creation of a new generation of addicts. We are yet to know the extent of the translation of non-nicotine vaping to nicotine-based products, but researchers are examining the relationship between vaping and moving on to tobacco products, and it is extremely worrying. Clearly, the industry has worked out the correlation. To profit, it needs the next generation to be addicted to its goods—to nicotine—so non-nicotine vapes must be seen as the first step for those moving into forms of nicotine addiction.

Where I believe the Bill falls short is in its approach to adults taking up vaping. As the Minister recognises, vapes are seen as an important public health measure to stop smoking, so there must be greater ambition to prevent people over 18, as well as those under 18, from starting vaping, yet the Bill is silent on that. We know that vapes are not harm free, and I urge the Minister to broaden her ambition for a nicotine-free generation by instituting vaping cessation programmes through a public health model.

Where people are allowed to vape should be no different from where they can smoke. Indeed, people who already have poor respiratory health are impacted by vaping. Therefore, let us make things simple by introducing one set of rules for public places such as bars and so on, and for private vehicles where they are children..

May I urge the Minister to look again at the enforcement proposals? I support investment in strengthening local authorities' trading standards teams. The team in York have just seized 1,000 vapes, worth £13,000. They need funding and the tools to do their work. I question the paucity of the fixed penalty notice, which is just £100. This is not a sufficient deterrent for illegal traders, and I urge the Government to increase the amount and review it annually. Placing that in secondary legislation would enable more flexibility.

That takes me to my last point about where I believe the legislation falls short. A vaping company came before the Health and Social Care Committee. It promoted its products through a relationship with Blackburn Rovers. The arguments it used for doing so mirrored those that the tobacco industry has propagated for decades. We saw right through them—we tested their reasoning and they failed at every turn. There must be an outright ban on all forms of vaping advertising for nicotine and non-nicotine products, and it should be no less stringent than the ban on tobacco advertising. We must legislate for a complete advertising ban, and I trust that the Minister will look at that when bringing the Bill into Committee.

The reason why I sound the warning bells is that the limitation on the available science does not mean that there is none. The Health and Social Care Committee has met academics at the University of London who have undertaken a study of 3,500 samples of tissue to

show that vaping can cause changes in epithelial cells in the oral cavity. They want to look at lung tissue, but access is available only via a bronchoscopy. They observed DNA methylation changes, which provide a very early indication that cells will grow more quickly and are biomarkers for early identification of the onset of disease, such as cancer. In researching the impact of smoking on tobacco users, the researchers have also demonstrated the impact of vaping. This powerful, peer-reviewed research is the first of its kind. I urge the Minister to read the paper by Professor Martin Weschwendler and Dr Chiara Herzog.

Smoking kills, and while vaping may be less harmful than smoking, it is not without significant risk. We cannot use ignorance—the excuse used by past Governments—as a reason for getting this wrong. We must follow the science, be on our guard and recognise that where people are being exploited, it is the duty of this Parliament to protect them. This industry is driven by a profit motive—one of exploitation. It is our job to protect our constituents.

4.14 pm

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): Everyone would like to see a cessation of smoking. People stopping for good, let alone starting at an early age, would bring long-term health benefits to the nation as a whole. Sadly, the problem is that this Bill will not be the vehicle to achieve such an ambition. It is a Bill written by non-smokers for smokers, and it is so out of touch with the cause that they want to cure that it will miss its target by a very long shot. First of all, the Bill does not ban smoking; it only stops the sale of tobacco to 18-year-olds if they turn 15 this year. We heard today from the Secretary of State that 100,000 children already start smoking every year. The sale of tobacco is already banned for those children.

The Bill is based on the premise that children today still ask their mate's older brother to buy them some cigarettes from the corner shop, like they did back in the 1980s. They do not. The vast majority of regular smokers today only ever buy their cigarettes from the corner shop when they have run out of illicitly bought cigarettes. If people do not believe me, they should pop into any pub in the UK and ask the smokers whether they buy tax-paid cigarettes from the supermarket and the corner shop. I guarantee that the vast majority do not. In every community there are avenues to buy illicit cigarettes at a fraction of the average price of £15 for a pack of 20 cigarettes from the corner shop.

A recent poll of 12,000 adult smokers found that the illegal tobacco market remains resilient in the UK in spite of the number of overall smokers declining year on year. On that basis alone, the illicit market is increasing. The study found that 76% of those 12,000 smokers bought tobacco in the last year that had not been subject to UK tax, with nearly one in two smokers having no objection to buying non-UK-duty-paid tobacco from family, friends, colleagues or shops. The poll also revealed that 9% of smokers who buy tobacco through social media or websites advertising cheap tobacco do so at least once a month.

Evidence from around the world shows that when we put further restrictions on people, smugglers and gangs take over where the Government have left the market. South Africa banned the sale of tobacco during the

[Craig Whittaker]

pandemic and it is now struggling with the gangs and smugglers who cover 93% of the market there. In Australia, as mentioned earlier, there has been a rise in the number of young people smoking, and retailers there have been fire-bombed when corner shops have refused to stock illicit tobacco. Children do not buy £15 packets of cigarettes either; they buy illicit tobacco from the same sources in the community—the smugglers and gangs.

The Secretary of State said that the Bill allocates £30 million to trading standards. That is a drop in the ocean. Trading standards is not just a sick department; it needs life support to come anywhere near to achieving the task it already needs to achieve. That £30 million still leaves it with a shortfall of £78 million on its budget in 2009. Spending on trading standards in 2009 was £213 million. This year it was frozen at £102.5 million, and between 2009 and 2016 the number of trading standards officers fell by 56%. The Chartered Trading Standards Institute has warned that cuts have created a “postcode lottery” of provision and called for an urgent review of how trading standards are resourced.

Andrew Rosindell: My right hon. Friend is making some extremely important points. He seems to be saying that, however laudable and well intentioned the Bill is, it is impractical and unenforceable because there is insufficient funding for trading standards to make it happen in reality.

Craig Whittaker: That is exactly what I am saying. The Government’s aim to create a generation of smoke-free people as time progresses just will not work. It is not working now when it is already banned for those 100,000 young people who take up smoking every year. In 2021, trading standards seized just over £7.8 million in illicit tobacco. This is from the UK Government’s own guesstimate that illicit tobacco accounts for more than 16% of the market, resulting in a loss of £2.8 billion—billion, not million—in tax and duty.

We have heard that the Bill is based on the New Zealand model. New Zealand does not have an illicit tobacco problem like we do here in the UK. It is 2,500 miles away from the nearest big trader, Australia; the UK is 23 miles away from the continent. The two countries cannot be compared. The New Zealand model has now failed, and it has performed a U-turn, as we have heard. Instead, the New Zealand Government continue to support initiatives to provide people with practical tools and support to help them to quit, including by ensuring the provision of effective services to stop smoking, providing access to alternative products to help smoking cessation, and promoting social media marketing campaigns to stop smoking and vaping.

The Bill provides little guidance or support on cessation to those who already smoke. I myself was one of the 6.4 million smokers here in the UK, but I stopped smoking just over a year ago. I found very little help or support from the Government, despite all the hype around what is being done. In fact, I tried virtually every product on the market to give up smoking—even hypnosis—and the only one that eventually made me give up was heated tobacco. That product, however, is not included in the Bill as a cessation tool. Instead, its sale to young people is to be banned. Even the Kiwis recognised what a great

cessation tool it is and did not include it in their ban. Instead, they put it in their arsenal of tools and recognised its benefits for cessation. In Japan, where 18.6 million people smoke, 25% of ex-smokers quit using heated tobacco, and Japan is already seeing the health benefits through its health system.

Similarly, more than half of the ex-smokers in the country with the lowest smoking rate in the world, Sweden, have quit using something called snus, which is already banned here in the UK. Ironically, the Government have put all their eggs into the vaping scene for cessation but 30% of those people who vape still smoke cigarettes. Not only that, but although Public Health England refers to alternative nicotine delivery devices, such as vaping products, the Bill does not include heated tobacco, which is delivered via just such a device.

To summarise, the Bill is not cut out for the Government’s ambitions. It follows a failed model that was devised in New Zealand, which does not have the UK’s issue with illicit tobacco. We will depend on a morsel of cash going to an incredibly stretched trading standards, which is operating on a budget that is half what it was 15 years ago, to police and enforce the policies in the Bill. The legislation underestimates the scale of the illicit tobacco trade already in the UK and will promote it even more in future. It also fails to promote cessation to the current 6.4 million smokers in the UK, and fails to recognise the many more products for people to use to quit that are better than cigarettes, such as heated tobacco. It fails on every level.

Finally, if the Government, and indeed this House, were serious about stopping people smoking, why not just set an arbitrary date in the future when smoking, in respect of either partaking or selling, will be banned completely? That will give us time for serious investment in cessation and will also give a serious amount of time to invest in stopping the illegal gangs and smugglers.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I remind colleagues that if they go quite a long way over the guidance, it does mean that others will have less time to speak. The guidance was seven minutes.

4.23 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I draw attention to my role as a vice chair of the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health, an APPG that supports this Bill and in particular the commitment to creating a smoke-free generation by raising the age of sale for tobacco. This will be the most impactful public health intervention since the introduction of smoke-free legislation under the last Labour Government. The Bill is particularly welcome after years of Government inaction on tobacco, which has put us well behind schedule for achieving the Smokefree 2030 ambition. According to Cancer Research UK, we are currently not on track to be smoke free until 2039, which is almost a decade later than planned, and it will be even later for the most deprived.

I welcome the new funding committed to local tobacco control activity and national mass-media campaigns, which will go some way towards fixing the damage done by more than a decade of cuts to public health funding.

Those cuts have fallen disproportionately on local stop-smoking services, which are a vital component of our strategy for reducing smoking rates. I am pleased that the Government have now recognised the importance of such services.

Since the legislation to raise the age of sale progressively by one year every year was announced, tobacco manufacturers have argued that it will be burdensome to business. They have also paid for advertising urging retailers to lobby against the legislation. Despite this, a survey by NEMS Market Research for ASH shows that more than half of a representative sample of retailers are supportive of such action, compared with only a quarter who are opposed.

Of course, the tobacco industry has form on trying to use retailers to lobby against tobacco laws. The Tobacco Retailers Alliance, a trade body 100% funded by tobacco manufacturers, funded the “save our shops” campaign against the display ban and the “no to plain packs” campaign against standardised cigarette packaging. Both campaigns used exactly the same argument now being used to campaign against raising the age of sale: that it will put a terrible burden on small businesses, that it will be impractical to implement and that it will increase illicit trade. Both campaigns were exposed as being fronts for the tobacco industry, and the subsequent legislation was successfully implemented by retailers. Indeed, a 2022 survey by NEMS Market Research for ASH found that the vast majority of small retailers report no negative impacts on their business due to the display ban or plain packs.

My region, the north-east, has been hit particularly hard by the tobacco epidemic, with 117,000 deaths from smoking since the turn of the century and thousands more added each year. That is not to mention the thousands more living with tobacco-related illnesses. As in every other region, this suffering is concentrated in the most deprived groups and areas. Although around 13% of adults in the north-east smoke, the figure rises to 21% of adults in routine and manual occupations, 28% of adults in social housing and 41% of adults with serious mental health conditions.

In the north-east, we are fortunate to benefit from the incredible work of our regional tobacco control programme. Fresh was set up in 2005 in response to our region having the country’s highest smoking rates. As a result of dedicated and sustained collaboration and investment from local authorities and the NHS, smoking rates have fallen further and faster in the north-east than anywhere else in the country—13.1% of the adult population now smokes, compared with 29% less than 20 years ago. The north-east is a prime example of what can be achieved with an effective regional tobacco control programme. Fresh is now funded by both the local authorities and the integrated care board, and that regional funding model is repeated in Greater Manchester. I encourage other regions to follow suit.

Children are especially vulnerable to second-hand smoke, which greatly increases their chance of developing a host of illnesses. The Royal College of Physicians has estimated that smoking by parents and carers is responsible for around 5,000 children being admitted to hospital each year, primarily with respiratory conditions. That is why I tabled a private Member’s Bill in 2011, aided by the British Lung Foundation, to ban smoking in cars carrying children. Despite the strong public health case

for the measure, it was not initially welcomed by the Government or the Opposition, and it took a long, hard campaign to get it over the line. Four years later, in 2015, legislation banning smoking in cars carrying children was put on the statute book with strong cross-party and public support.

Gareth Johnson: How many times has that offence been prosecuted?

Alex Cunningham: That is an interesting question. There have been only a handful of prosecutions because the legislation has played an important role in people changing their behaviour. YouGov’s 2008 polling for ASH found that banning smoking in cars was supported by less than half of all smokers. The proportion had risen to 62% by the time of my private Member’s Bill, and to 82% after the ban came into effect. The lesson to be learned is that support has grown significantly over time for the tougher regulation of tobacco. After measures have been put in place, support continues to grow, particularly among smokers. We have come a long way in our attitudes to smoking since I became an MP in 2010. I have enjoyed campaigning on the issue, but I look forward to the Bill becoming law before I step down. Not only will the legislation prevent future generations from acquiring this terrible addiction; it offers the most direct path to making smoking truly obsolete in our society.

4.30 pm

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): I would like to point out three things at the outset. First, I used to be a smoker. I was probably one of the earliest adopters of vaping in the UK—certainly I was among them. Secondly, I am a member of the all-party parliamentary group for responsible vaping, whose chair will doubtless speak today. Thirdly, I draw Members’ attention to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I chair an advisory board to a company that may or may not be doing vapes.

Here in the UK, we have been incredibly successful in our smoking cessation policies thus far. In fact, we are the envy of the world with our rates of smoking cessation. Yes, we are behind target, and yes, according to the Khan review, we might not hit the 2030 mark, but we have been incredibly successful. I have travelled around the world talking about our success. People ask how we have done it, and I explain that the industry did it: it came up with a fantastic device called a vape. Initially it was all a bit dodgy and shaky; people were mixing liquids in Manchester in their baths and it was all very complicated. We got a grip on it, now there is regulation, and provided people are vaping legally, it is safe and usable. Millions of smokers have stopped smoking by using vaping devices. It is a huge success story.

The thing that makes me smile the most is the number of children who smoke. Back in 1982, 13% of 11 to 15-year-olds—secondary-school kids—smoked. I remember it, as I was around then—many of us remember it—and everyone used to smoke behind the bike sheds. In 2003, 9% smoked, which was good progress. By 2010, only 5% of schoolchildren smoked. Today, only 1% of schoolchildren smoke. That is a record of success. It is not a huge disaster that suddenly needs a radical change of policy to resolve the issue. In my view, it merely requires upping the ante on enforcement and messaging, rather than a draconian approach.

[Adam Afriyie]

I welcome the Bill in two ways. First, the measures on vaping are pretty strong and pretty good. Most Members would agree that we need to look at packaging so that it is not marketed to children, and we need to look at flavours. We do not need to look at the flavours themselves; I urge the Secretary of State to look at the descriptors in the relevant part of the Bill rather than the flavours themselves as a regulatory issue. It does not matter to a smoker who wishes to quit whether the flavour is called blueberry or anything else. All that matters is that the flavour exists. It does not matter if it has a reference number and a plain package. What matters is that the flavour exists—for example, mango, which was used by my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Mark Eastwood); I tended to use blueberry—to encourage smokers to shift, but it does not necessarily need to be named on the pack, which could be marketed to children.

There is another key issue on the vaping measures in the Bill. It is unbelievable, but the entire tobacco industry is ready to open its chequebook to pay for Trading Standards and enforcement. The entire vaping industry, including vaping associations and retailers, is ready to say, “We don’t want these cowboys in the industry. We want to drive them out as much as you, because they give us a bad name and it encourages nanny-state politicians to meddle and interfere, stopping us doing our lawful trade.” A vast sum of money is available from the industry to be used by the Government, hopefully directly through Trading Standards, so that Trading Standards does not just have a few million here and there but has hundreds of millions of pounds and hundreds of new staff who can do their job and drive the cowboys out of the industry, and we can ensure that we see an end to all the practices that have been mentioned today.

Bans do not work. I am not going to make a high-principled speech about freedom, but frankly bans do not work. Bhutan and Malaysia tried it, but it did not work. Australia got close to doing it with some very complicated legislation, but it did not work. Guess what? Smoking rates went up, including smoking rates among kids. New Zealand had a really good stab at it, and then said, “Nah, it’s unconstitutional and it’s probably not going to work as well.” Bans do not work, so the idea that we, in the United Kingdom, would now be at the vanguard of that is ridiculous.

For goodness’ sake, our policy as it stands is working. We just need to do it faster, make more money available for enforcement and get on with changing the descriptors to ensure fewer people are smoking, particularly our children. Nobody wants our children to smoke. Nobody wants people to die. The false argument I have heard today that anybody who does not agree with the generational ban is somehow evil and wants people to die really upsets me. We should not resort to that sort of language.

The main reason why I cannot support the Bill is the generational smoking ban. I would perfectly happily support the rest of the Bill, but I really cannot support that ban. If the Government had been bold enough to say, “Right, we are going to ban smoking below the age of 21”, I would have had huge reluctance but I would have said, “Yeah, fair enough.” Why? Because we would have been treating people the same. The Bill is making a

huge constitutional change by saying that two adults will not be treated the same. It is inequality under the law. Even in Malaysia, their Attorney General said, “We can’t do that”, and they are not nearly as civilised as we are here. Several other countries have come to the same conclusion.

I do not know how we have got into this state. It is so unnecessary. There are so many more important things to be doing in the world at the moment, yet now we are in this place. If this Bill somehow gets through with Labour’s support—of course, Labour always love bans; I get that and that is fine. Forgive me for being political, but it is ridiculous to have our Prime Minister, who has enough things to deal with, putting through a Bill, with Labour’s support. Why on earth do that at this stage?

Andrew Rosindell: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. Surely this should be something that should evolve? As he has highlighted, the statistics show that very few young people now smoke, so we should let things gradually evolve rather than impose them. After the New Zealand example, is it not clear that a ban simply will not work?

Adam Afriyie: I could not agree more.

To conclude, I cannot vote for a Bill that treats adults unequally in law. The Bill creates a precedent in the United Kingdom of treating people differently—adult human beings; citizens—and of inequality under the law. I cannot support that. We are making a huge political mistake. I hope that even at this late stage we can make some amendments or change the way the legislation works. We could at least say that there is a condition—that we will bring the Bill into law, but that it can be enacted by a future Government only if smoking rates are not, for argument’s sake, below 3% by 2035. In that way we have the political win—we have got the Bill though and it is legislation—but the measures are not actually enacted.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I have nothing against interventions, but I suggest that if colleagues take interventions, they should still stick to the guidelines.

4.38 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I rise to speak in support of this important Bill. Smoking is entirely harmful and there are no benefits. Cancer Research UK is clear that tobacco remains the single biggest cause of cancer in the UK, causing an estimated 125,000 deaths per year—one person every five minutes. On average, smokers lose 10 years of their life expectancy and face lifelong health complications.

Despite the protestations of tobacco companies, smoking also has a detrimental effect on our economy. Action on Smoking and Health estimates that the overall cost of productivity losses and health and care needs caused by smoking costs the UK a staggering £17.3 billion every year.

We have come a long way in recent decades in reducing smoking rates. The last Labour Government led the way on smoking harms, raising the legal smoking age to 18, banning cigarette advertising in shops and introducing the transformative ban on smoking in enclosed public

spaces and workplaces. It is now hard to recall just how society ever thought that smoke-filled restaurants, pubs and tube carriages were remotely acceptable.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Helen Hayes: I will not give way at this stage, I am afraid.

It is still the case that more than one in 10 adults—around 6.4 million people—are smokers. I wish to pay tribute to my constituent, Gower Tan. Gower began to smoke at the age of 13. His father was also a lifelong smoker and died early at the age of just 66 from lung cancer. This was devastating for Gower and his family and led him to give up smoking at the age of 40. Gower has since become a tireless campaigner for Cancer Research UK—first as an ambassador and more recently as part of the staff team. Gower and his family know as well as anyone the pain and heartache that smoking can cause and the deep sorrow that comes from knowing that the death of a loved one was preventable.

Like my hon. Friend, the shadow Secretary of State, I fully support the Bill's measures to ban smoking for anyone born after 2009, freeing future generations from the health impacts of tobacco. I also welcome the Bill's urgently needed measures to regulate advertising and restrict the availability of vapes to children and teenagers. We on the Labour Benches have been calling for action on this for a long time. Last year, I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill on the advertising of vapes to children. One in five 11 to 15-year-olds in England used vapes in 2021, and under-age vaping has dramatically increased by 50% in the past three years. Five years ago, vaping was not a significant concern, but now it is raised with me in every school that I visit. Teachers are routinely having to manage the disruption in the classroom that addiction causes.

Vaping has a really important role in smoking cessation and that role should not be undermined by this legislation, but although vaping is far less harmful than smoking, it is not a harmless activity. Last year, 40 children were admitted to hospital with vaping-related issues. There is evidence of respiratory harm and impacts on mental health and concentration levels.

We can see the strategy of the vaping companies. They are seeking to secure future demand for their products by getting children addicted today. It is frankly absurd for e-cigarette manufacturers to claim that they are not targeting children. In displays across the country, brightly coloured advertising for vapes mimic popular brands and characters. Flavours such as gummy bears, skittles, tutti-frutti and cherry cola are clearly designed to appeal to children and vapes are being openly promoted to children on social media.

Although I support the Bill today, it would be remiss of me not to ask what has taken the Government so long. They have had repeated opportunities to introduce new regulations on the marketing of vapes. My hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) put forward an amendment in November 2021 to the Health and Care Bill to ban the branding of vapes that appeal to children, while the Electronic Cigarettes (Branding, Promotion and Advertising) Bill introduced last year would have banned e-cigarettes and vaping products from being advertised to appeal directly to children.

These delays will have led to more children experimenting with e-cigarettes and becoming addicted to recreational vaping.

Today, we have a genuine opportunity to stop the harm of nicotine addiction and free future generations from the health impacts of smoking. We on the Labour Benches are clear that we will put the health of children and young people first. A Government who cannot command the support of their own MPs for a flagship piece of legislation should surely step aside, call a general election and allow someone else to do the job.

4.43 pm

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I wish to declare almost an opposite interest: I have never smoked a cigarette or a cigar in my life. I have never even put one to my very lips, yet I am against the Bill. That is not because I have any vested interest in the tobacco lobby or because I am a smoker or an ex-smoker; it is because I am a lover of freedom, a lover of choice and a lover of information. To me, that is vital.

I am neither one of the older Members nor one of the younger Members of the House, but I remember that throughout my time at school the evils of smoking were drummed into us. I do not think that any Member of the House, or any person in this country, does not know the evil of smoking, including health degradation and damage to lives and families, because it is drummed in every single step of the way—as I think it should be, because smoking is wrong.

I do not like smoking, and I wish people would not do it, but if we believe in freedom of speech, independence of mind and people making informed choices, we should let people do what they want as long as they have the facts before them—and we do provide the facts. The NHS stop-smoking policies have done an amazing job over the past few decades of ensuring that everyone knows the facts, so no one can say when they start smoking or vaping that they do not know the full implications of what they are doing—they do. We know that they do because, as has already been said, the number of young people smoking has absolutely collapsed over the past few decades. My hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) correctly mentioned that only 1% of schoolchildren smoke. That 1% statistic is terrible and represents far too many children, but compared to what it was, it is really good news.

As I said in my earlier interventions, children generally do not smoke anymore, so that is not where the battle is. I believe that the battle against smoking has been won—we are just fighting the last rearguard action—which is why I think the Bill is fundamentally wrong. It is fighting yesterday's wars, not tomorrow's wars. The vaping aspect is incredibly important and is what we must focus on. We and the Government need to focus our attention on super-strength vapes and marketing to children. That is incredibly important, and I am glad that the Bill goes some way towards rectifying that. The ban on the free distribution of vaping products to under-18s is also great news.

However, we are dividing our time between that and focusing on a dying industry in a bizarrely puritanical way by stamping out some people's choice and freedom. Who is to say that, in a few years' time, a 21-year-old cannot celebrate their graduation with a cigar? If they want to, why not? Why shouldn't someone celebrate the

[Alexander Stafford]

birth of a child with a cigar, or maybe with a pinch of snuff? Who are we to say that that is not their choice to make? Who are we to say, “You shouldn’t celebrate in this way”?

I have many vices, Madam Deputy Speaker. I like a glass of beer or a pint of wine every now and again. I know in my heart of hearts that they are wrong for me and probably limit my health, but I drink them. I eat burgers and chips, accepting that they are fundamentally life-shortening. But do they make my life better? Do I enjoy doing it? Yes, and I do so in the full knowledge of what I am doing. This is the crux of the matter: we are talking now about cigarettes, cigars, snuff or shisha, but what is to stop us from saying tomorrow or the next day that burgers, red wine and all the little things that people sometimes enjoy in moderation—that make life worth living—are bad for them? Sometimes people want that bit of enjoyment, but we sit here and say, “No, you cannot have that choice; we know better and we are taking that choice away from you.”

As long as everyone has the knowledge about what tobacco products do, we should give them the choice—that is terribly important. I am also confused by the fact that, once again, we are using a sledgehammer to crack a nut by banning all tobacco products. How many people in this country do snuff, say? Not many, so why are we impinging on their liberty? There is not an epidemic of children taking snuff at school, so why are we banning it? Snuff does not represent a massive health risk or have a huge impact on the NHS, yet we are banning it—that is crazy. We are banning things that are not having a huge impact on the economy or the health of our nation, and that concerns me greatly.

A country that has gone through this process is New Zealand, which banned tobacco sales. However, it then overturned the ban. If the policy was such a success, why did New Zealand not double down on it and go further? My biggest issue with the measure is the rolling age of consent, which is fundamentally discriminatory. Adults are adults, and they make their own choices and own their failures. A 28-year-old does not know better than a 29-year-old; someone of 18 years and one day does not know any better than someone of 17 years and 364 days. We are creating cases in which people are unequal before the law, and that is wrong.

Also, let us not kid ourselves: we know that having a rolling age of consent is completely impractical and unworkable, and it will have to be got rid of. Let us be honest: we are not going to have a situation in 10 or 20 years’ time where a 34-year-old is ID’d at a tobacconist or a newsagents and told, “You look 33, sir.” “Oh, thank you very much for flattering me.” It is going to be banned outright, and we know that. This is the thin end of the wedge. It will create inequality in the law, cut down on freedoms and fundamentally make life that bit harder for everyone.

Many years ago, as has been described, this place was a bastion of puritanism. There were so many roundheads fighting the King many years ago in the civil war, but I say that at the moment there are too many roundheads in this Parliament—too many naysayers, too many people banning things. What we need is a few more cavaliers: a few more people trying to enjoy bits of life while making informed choices. For that reason, I oppose the

Bill, although it does contain some good bits about vaping. We should be fighting the next battle, which is fully against vapes, rather than wasting our time fighting yesterday’s battles.

4.50 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I would like to start with some figures from my local authority area and my constituency. Smoking prevalence is currently 9.9% in my constituency—that is 6,600 people who are smoking. The total cost of smoking to the constituency is estimated at £73.2 million: a productivity loss of £42 million, social care costs of £28 million, and healthcare costs of £2.9 million. The constituency spends £22.4 million on tobacco annually, and the average smoker spends £3,000 a year on tobacco.

Across Gateshead, the rate of smoking during pregnancy was 10.9% in 2022-23, compared with 8.8% nationally. The smoking rate among adults in different occupations showed that the more deprived areas were smoking more than those in other areas—as always, deprivation comes into these things. There were 688 lung cancer registrations between 2017 and 2019, and we know that smoking causes more than seven in 10 lung cancer cases. In 2019-20 there were 2,707 smoking-attributable hospital admissions in Gateshead. There were 825 emergency hospital admissions for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and we know that smoking is a key determinant of COPD cases. As such, I welcome the measures in the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, which will take us one step closer to a smoke-free future, and I am pleased to see that my party has pledged to support those efforts.

Creating a smoke-free generation will radically level up the health and wealth of our nation, especially in regions such as the north-east. The north-east has traditionally had a higher prevalence of smoking than the rest of the country, although we have made very significant gains in narrowing that gap thanks to the tireless efforts of local councils and NHS trusts working together, not to mention Fresh, our brilliant regional tobacco control programme. Despite that progress, though, our communities still suffer terribly as a result of smoking. As I have said, in 2019-20 there were over 2,700 smoking-attributable hospital admissions in Gateshead—where my constituency is based—and 825 emergency hospital admissions for COPD. Between 2017 and 2019 there were just over 1,000 deaths resulting from smoking in Gateshead alone. Ending smoking for the next generation will safeguard them from the suffering that has afflicted previous generations.

However, we need to do much more to ensure that smokers in the most deprived groups are not left behind as we move towards a smoke-free future. The disparity between different groups is even more extreme for people with mental health conditions, with smoking rates as high as 26% for those with depression and anxiety, compared with 14% of the general population. Calculations by Action on Smoking and Health show that at the current rate of decline, smokers with a mental health condition will not achieve smoke-free status until after 2050, around 20 years later than those without a mental health condition. This Bill is a major step in the right direction and will have a profound positive impact on the health and wellbeing of the next generation, but we must go further to tackle the health inequalities that continue to afflict the most disadvantaged in our communities.

4.54 pm

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): I believe it is a noble cause to encourage people to give up smoking or not to take it up in the first place, because we know that smoking is a very unhealthy habit and it is very costly, so I do appreciate the good intentions behind the Bill. There are some things in the Bill that I do agree with, but unfortunately I cannot support it, and I am going to outline why. It is basically about trusting adults to make their own decisions in life and to choose their own approach. I believe that should be our approach, and there have been some very good contributions so far on why that should be the case. Of course, all societies have rules and we have to live by them, but I believe that these rules are unnecessary.

This legislation will not stop children from smoking per se. It is aimed at them once they reach adult life. That takes me back to when I was a teenager, and I remember an elderly lady on one of the tills at a local supermarket used to accept seeing a set of car keys as an acceptable form of ID. Unsurprisingly, a lot of my friends started to own a set of car keys many years before they owned cars. However, I think we all appreciate the importance of preventing under-age sales. We need the robust enforcement of that, and of course prevention of the illegal tobacco trade, which not only deprives the Treasury of funds but can put people at risk of some very dangerous products. The same applies to vapes, and I have been working with the authorities locally to clamp down on places that sell them. I remember that once upon a time it was the pupils who hid behind the bike sheds to smoke, and then I remember as a teacher that, after the ban came in, which included staffrooms, it would normally be the teachers hiding there and trying to cadge a cigarette.

Labour Members have mentioned some of the previous bans that have come in and some of the actions the Labour Government took. I am old enough to remember when the ban on tobacco advertising came in, and there was of course an exemption for Formula 1. We have spoken a lot about vested interests. The boss of Formula 1 was of course a major Labour donor at the time, and it did secure that exemption. I would ask them whether they believe it was right to take its cash, and whether it was right to give that exemption. I would be very interested to hear the shadow Health Minister's view on that later.

To take the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker), would a cut-off date for all cigarettes or smoking be easier to enforce than the current proposal, and why should some adults have fewer rights than others? We must also appreciate the role of vaping. As has been pointed out, Sweden is a world leader in this. It is down to 5.6%, and when a country gets down to the 5% target it is classed as smoke free. Yes, it used things such as snus, which was outlawed throughout the rest of the European Union. It had special exemptions, and I believe an opportunity has been missed over the years to use that to cut down on the number of smokers, but vaping has of course provided a highly effective alternative.

However, a principle is at stake today, and what I really want to speak about is the principle of one group of adults having rights that are different from those of

other sets of adults. We can compare this to the right to vote over the years, whether under the Representation of the People Act 1918 or the further Act in 1928. Going back to 1884, 40% of men, mainly the poorest in society, did not have the right to vote. Later, when the vote was extended to all men over 21, women could vote only if they were over the age of 30, or if they or their husband had land with a rateable value of £5 or more. It was not until 1969 that the voting age was lowered to 18. I remember being elected as a councillor in Nottingham at the young age of 22, and it was not until 2006 that the age limit for that was changed to 18. Again, there were adults at that time who had different rights.

People have been treated differently on the basis of their religion over the years, such as whether they were a Catholic or a Protestant in the 1600s. We have had the Race Relations Act 1965, where we outlawed people being treated differently on the grounds of their colour, race or national origin. Then we had equal marriage, of which we have just celebrated 10 years, another example of where adults are equal before the law, to love who they wish and marry who they wish. I believe we are moving towards freedom, and that is a good thing: it is about giving more rights and more equality, not restricting it. The point is that the direction of travel has been about giving adults, whatever their background, the right to live their lives within the law as they wish so long as they are not impinging on the rights of others. That is the right direction, and the right thing to do. As Margaret Thatcher once said,

“when people are free to choose they choose freedom”.

But what next? A ban on alcohol, or a ban on takeaways? I declare an interest in both of those, but both of them are bad for us when not done responsibly. But we are adults, and these are our choices; these are not the state's choices. We need to get back to trusting adults to make their own decisions in life. I do not like banning things as a rule—yes, there are always cases that we can make, but I do not believe the case has been made here yet.

We have already witnessed other nations dumping this idea, including New Zealand, and I do not believe the legislation in its current form will pass the test of time. I believe it is unenforceable. I absolutely support the intention to move towards a smoke-free generation, but I believe there is a better way, and that is why I will be voting against the Bill.

5.1 pm

Sir Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called in this debate, although I confess it is one that has depressed me, because this is fundamentally illiberal legislation. If I am in the House for any reason it is because I believe in liberalism—in the ability of people to make better choices for themselves than can the state.

It strikes me that we are witnessing an encroaching tide whereby ever more of our liberties are taken away from us—the speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Sir Jake Berry) was very good on that. We are fortunate in Britain to live in a country where we do not get our rights from the state; we have them inalienably from birth, and it is only the things that we proactively proscribe that we cannot do, but we are adding more and more things to that list.

[*Sir Simon Clarke*]

I say that as someone who is totally clear that smoking is a terrible idea, and I would not recommend it to any young person. I have spent a lot of time with Mr Jonathan Ferguson at James Cook University Hospital in Middlesbrough and have seen the pioneering work he has done on lung cancer. It is absolutely crystal clear that smoking damages your health and damages your wealth and is an antisocial habit in so many ways, but—and it is a big but—I do not believe it is my right to tell my fellow citizens that they cannot do it, any more than it is their right to tell me that I cannot have a glass of red wine with dinner. These are not things that the state ought sensibly to be proscribing.

I actually think we have reached a relatively sensible point with regard to smoking legislation. Not allowing smoking in public places where it can impinge on others is very reasonable and sensible, and I do not think anyone would want to go back to the situation before the 2006 legislation. However, whether we smoke at all in private should be up to us, not the state. We risk creating a huge philosophical as well as practical problem, which will undoubtedly lead to further rights creep as the years go by, because it is likely that the health lobby—the interventionist lobby, as the shadow Secretary of State put it in his speech—will use this as a logic to allow them to move into other fields, and what will our ability then be to resist that argument if we have conceded it here today? So there is a profound philosophical problem with this.

I also believe that it will in practice be a nightmare for shop workers up and down the country to be asked to enforce this. It will place them in an invidious position, which is likely to lead either to them facing real trouble in their shops or, frankly, to them passing the buck and ignoring the law, and making a mockery of its existing at all.

Steve Brine: On the “what next?” point, when I was Public Health Minister, we brought in the sugar tax with the soft drinks industry levy. That encouraged the industry to reformulate drinks and took quite a lot of sugar out as a result, because industry followed that trend. If we reformulated processed food to take a lot of salt out and saved a lot of lives from stroke, would that be a good or a bad thing?

Sir Simon Clarke: That would arguably be perfectly sensible, but it is different from a ban. The point is about the degree of harm. I strongly support the ban on illegal drugs, but I do so because cocaine, heroin and the like wreck lives and destroy communities. Tobacco does not do that, but we already have enough difficulty enforcing the existing bans that we have in place, which already stretch our resources to the utmost. Frankly, as we all know, we all too often fail to enforce those bans. Adding a new ban risks creating something that will be unworkable from the outset, while creating a huge black market in which criminal enterprise will thrive. Meanwhile, the state will have forgone the tax revenues—some £10 billion or £11 billion a year—that are ploughed back into our public services, including the health service, to combat the effects of smoking. That revenue simply will not be there anymore. We will likely still have people smoking, but we will have offset many of the revenue streams that allow us to combat it.

I simply do not understand how a Conservative Prime Minister thought it appropriate to bring forward legislation that is the opposite of why we are sent to this House, which is to defend and uphold the principle of individual choice and individual liberty. As we have heard, where this legislation has been introduced, it has already been repealed, as in New Zealand. I fear that in this country we will face a choice in the years ahead: either eventual repeal because the legislation does not work or, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) said, an outright ban, because of the sheer unworkability of trying to ascertain in practice whether the person in front of you in the queue is aged 39 or 40. We will doubtless simply see a Labour Government move towards an outright ban to make the situation simpler, tidier and neater. That would be a real red line, but we would have forgone the ability to make the principal case against it.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): My right hon. Friend says that drugs destroy lives, but tobacco does not. What about the people who are dying from emphysema and long-term lung cancer? Many families in the United Kingdom are seeing their relatives die a long, lingering death as a result of using tobacco.

Sir Simon Clarke: With respect to my hon. Friend, I said that those drugs destroy communities. There is a profound difference. The ripple effect of illegal drugs is to prompt real social harm to others, because those habits are so destructive that people steal and rob to fund them. Tobacco does not do that. It is obviously extremely bad for people, but it does not drive patterns of behaviour as destructive as those associated with crime. That is a fundamental difference, and it is why we should focus our efforts on stopping those trades, rather than on banning something that has been legal for hundreds of years. We all recognise it carries real medical harms, but it is not, I submit, our job to try to take it away from people. We should rely on education and the tax system, but we should not rely on legislation to tell other people what to do when they are grown adults in a free country.

5.8 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I rise in support of the Government's Bill. One of the first speakers this afternoon was my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans), who talked about his first job in respiratory medicine. My first job as a doctor was in adult respiratory medicine, too, and I spent a lot of time looking after patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, intermittent claudication and lung cancer, and that taught me that smoking causes not just premature death, but substantial, debilitating, miserable disability that can go on for many years. I therefore support the Government in doing all they can to reduce the number of smokers.

Some people have talked today about the freedom for an adult to choose to do what they want, but we already make changes to what adults can do. We already restrict their freedoms. For example, we tell adults that they must put a seatbelt on when they get in the car. They must wear a helmet when they ride a motorcycle. They cannot drink alcohol before they get in a car, and they cannot drive down the motorway at 150 mph. So we already make restrictions for people's safety on that basis.

I do think that gradually increasing the age is inelegant, as my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, put it, and will be challenging to enforce. But the alternative—to ban smoking outright—would be difficult, because it is an addictive substance. If we banned an addictive substance overnight, we would criminalise those already addicted. By doing it in advance and gradually increasing the age, we will instead not criminalise people for being addicted, because they will not get addicted in the first place, at least in principle.

I want to focus most of my remarks on vaping. I have been campaigning on vaping for some time, because I am concerned about the snowballing number of children who are addicted to it. Indeed, last year I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill to try to ban disposable vapes, which have been the most attractive vapes to children and cause the most environmental damage. At the time, 1.3 million vapes a week were being used—it is now up to 5 million. They are almost impossible to recycle in practice because the lithium batteries are difficult to recycle, and the nicotine gets soaked into the plastic, which makes that difficult to recycle as well.

I understand the need for adults to have something to help them stop smoking, but vapes are not just a stop-smoking device; we should look at them as an alternative addiction. Earlier in my campaigning, when I spoke to the industry, I said, “What is it with all these flavours?” I was told, “Well, the thing is, if someone tries to stop smoking using nicotine gum, they use the nicotine gum—or something—as a stop-smoking device. So they go from smoking, to gum, to nothing. If we give them vapes that taste of tobacco or are bland, they go from smoking, to vaping, to nothing. If we give them cherry cola-flavoured vapes, they go from smoking, to vaping cherry cola, to vaping mango and to vaping blueberry. They remain one of our customers and continue to use our product.” The industry is trying to create a new generation of addicts to make itself billions of pounds.

I can understand why the industry wants to make the money, but the way it is doing so is, in my view, immoral. In particular, its marketing of these things at children is immoral. A grown-up may wish to have a cherry cola-flavoured vape, but he or she does not need to have a unicorn milkshake-flavoured cherry vape shaped like SpongeBob SquarePants. That is why the flavours are important, and I welcome the Government’s measures to deal with flavours, colours, shapes and packaging.

What are the risks of vaping? As others have said, education is really important on that. For our children, in the short term, its powerful addiction causes problems with concentration, with some having to leave lessons because they cannot cope until the end of a double lesson without vaping. In some cases, as we have heard, it causes chest symptoms and can cause collapse. In the long term, the simple answer is that we just do not know.

A recent University College London study showed that DNA methylation—modification of DNA—occurs in people who vape. Does that show that vaping causes cancer? No, it does not. Time will tell us that, but it suggests at least that it might. That is why we must be extremely careful with our children. Adolescents will

always experiment with substances because it is in the nature of adolescence to experiment with boundaries, but we need to ensure that we take as much care of them as we possibly can.

In particular, I welcome clause 10, which will allow the provisions to be extended to other nicotine products. The industry is making billions of pounds, and it will continue trying to flex to try to keep people addicted to nicotine. We can see that today. A search on the internet shows that Tesco is selling 20 nicotine pouches for £6.50. Those tiny pouches of up to 12 mg of nicotine—about 10 cigarettes-worth—are placed under a person’s gums and will release those 10 cigarettes of nicotine over an hour. They are sold in flavours called “Ice Cool”, Bergamot Wildberry”, “Mocha” and “Elderflower”. Does the House see a pattern here? That will be the next thing, and that is why I welcome the clause, which will allow the Government to reflect, if they want, on new forms of nicotine use.

I have some questions for the Minister. The Health Act 2006 prevents smoking in enclosed public spaces, on public transport and in certain other areas. Why has that not been extended to vaping? Also, as I was walking through Westminster the other day, I saw a big red Transport for London bus advertising vaping—something I have written to Sadiq Khan about. I wonder whether the Government plan to extend vaping regulations not just to what the package looks like but to the advertising itself.

Kirsten Oswald: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Johnson: I will not, because I have only a minute left.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) mentioned the advertising at Blackburn Rovers; again, sports advertising while children are watching is not helpful.

I have a final question for the Minister. Given that this is urgent, we are seeing so many children starting vaping and we want to stop people smoking as soon as possible, why are we waiting to bring in the regulations? Why not bring them in to affect children more quickly?

5.15 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie), I was a smoker for many a year. I gave up some 30 years ago and, as I said in an earlier intervention, it was one of the hardest things I ever did. I wish to God that vaping had been available to me then to help me off what would now be a £45-a-day habit. I certainly disagree that people do not steal to support such a habit, as it is extraordinarily expensive.

As we all know, banning things tends to drive things underground. As far as I have heard, no one has mentioned the prohibition of alcohol in America and what that led to. I consider myself a libertarian Conservative, and I think that the best Government should interfere in the market the least, and spend our taxpayers’ money only when they really need to. As always, the growth of the state is little more than good news for bureaucrats. No one in Clacton has ever looked at issues locally and told me that the solution was new taxes and over-convoluted legislation.

[Giles Watling]

However, this is about not dogmas but practicality. It is about not ideology but pragmatism, science and economics. There are a number of measures in the Bill that I support. The banning of disposable vapes seems timely, given the ecological damage they cause, going to landfill and being strewn across our streets in countless millions. Revisiting the legal age of vaping and smoking seems to be a logical response to the worrying fact of under-age people navigating their way towards addiction through vapes. I am pleased that the Government have listened to me on the subject of nicotine pouches, which my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) mentioned.

Let us consider what the science of public health and the recent economic facts have taught us: vapes are cheap, available and attractive to many. That is why smoking has dramatically decreased. The recent tax on vape liquid may be regressive if vaping costs start to gain parity with normal cigarettes. The free market has done its job and has given the public a cheaper and healthier alternative. I would be deeply worried about the unintended consequences of monkeying around with that.

We also need to step out of this place and consider what works on the ground. No one currently needs a licence from their local authority to sell vapes or nicotine products. That means that trading standards teams are often a skeleton crew. Do we think a complex and incremental age-increasing ban is enforceable with such weak enforcement? It is not. I do not buy the argument that we pay for expanded teams via increased fines. We do not increase staff headcount based on speculative, one-off cash injections from fines. If we want to clamp down on the very real issue of illegal cigarettes and the under-age sale of cigarettes and vapes, we need a licensing scheme that properly funds trading standards, rewarding responsible business owners and going after the villains.

I could support a ban on selling these products to those under 21, 18 or whatever. Such a ban could hit the Government's laudable goal of killing off under-age consumption by getting the sale out of teenage years entirely. That is simple and impactful, and is preferable to a law that puts the shopkeeper in the firing line, having to interrogate people and turfing out the 22-year-old, while questioning the 24-year-old and supplying the 25-year-old. That is clearly nuts. I have spoken to retailers in Clacton, and the generational nature of the ban is quite frightening for many. To many it seems like a charter for confusion and confrontation. It also might criminalise people inadvertently.

There is a way forward. There are bold steps we can take with under-age addictions, without damaging the health advancements that the free market has allowed us to make. I believe that licensing is the answer.

5.19 pm

Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con): Fifteen years of experience of leading and scrutinising complicated legislation tells me to be cautious with the Bill. I strongly admire its aims, but I have some questions to set out as to whether it will work.

With direct knowledge of cancer and deep commitment to cancer awareness, I want people to smoke less. As we have heard, smoking causes around one in four of all

UK cancer deaths. Tobacco, especially cigarette smoking, is the single most important and, as we have heard, preventable cause of ill health, disability and death in this country. I agree with the Bill's hope of reducing that suffering. I also desire the Bill's aim to realise an economic saving on healthcare, named as more than £3 billion in the impact assessment, and a productivity gain of £24 billion over 30 years. My hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), the chair of the Health Committee, is right that we should be taking the long-term view and looking for the gains from prevention. For all that to be possible, however, the legislation has to work.

I am joining today's debate—I shall keep it concise, Madam Deputy Speaker—because I care very much about politics and democracy working. As I stand down from Parliament this year, this is one of the final pieces of draft legislation for me and it is a significant proposition, so I will raise some points that are all intended to be thoughtful and are based on five terms of constituency work and ministerial experience in six Departments. In one of my past roles, I had to undo legislation that I had helped to implement, because it did not work.

The age-of-sale mechanism in the Bill is the untested thing. It would be the first of its kind in the world, but that accolade would come only because a few have tried and failed to carry support. The Bill as a whole has an imperfect evidence base—that is clear throughout its analysis, in particular because we do not yet have the full data picture about the effects of vaping—so what is in front of us today is inherently risky and theoretical. It is also possible that it may be divisive by asking one group of adults to live under rules different from those for another. I understand that the Malaysian equivalent was challenged on equality grounds and I would be really interested to know what lessons the Minister has drawn from that.

It is legitimate to be worried that something so novel may be unfair on retailers. The British Independent Retailers Association points out that the quite sophisticated enforcement needs of the mechanism fall on its members. As the Association of Convenience Stores adds, the

“proxy purchasing of any age-restricted products is extremely difficult for retailers to detect and prevent.”

Indeed, the deterrent in the Bill for proxy purchasing is just £50, if a person caught and pays promptly. After my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's efforts at the latest Budget, that is actually only the cost of about two or three packets of cigarettes. I am therefore concerned that the design of the proxy-buying deterrents in the Bill could be fatally impractical for what is trying to be achieved. Let us put that in really super-practical terms. A person's friend, a year older, may well be able to go into a shop or online and get two packets and let their friend have one, and the cost of their doing so adds up in the end to only three or four packets for themselves. We ought to give considerable thought to that.

The British Retail Consortium says that a better policy is needed on ID. I agree. I was surprised that the impact assessment says nothing about the impact of individuals needing to provide ID throughout their life, instead of just up to the age of adulthood. The document, of course, does deal with the costs to retailers of checking ID, but it is silent on the burden of asking a particular group of adults to have to prove their date of birth

for life. I am talking about those who are or look, and would continue to be or to look, just above the age stated in the Bill. Healthy or unhealthy, right or wrong, they have every right to buy cigarettes and would remain in possession of that right, but they would have to prove it for life under the Bill.

When I took the Bill that became the Elections Act 2022 through the House, we were rightly questioned hard about the notion of asking adults to bring identification to polling stations. We acknowledged up front that not everyone holds a driving licence or a passport, and ensured that other forms of ID were available, given the importance of people's democratic rights. This is a slightly different point and I am not making a direct comparison, but for the purposes of retail, free ID—for example, the CitizenCard—is already available. However, it needs to be renewed every few years, and a new requirement in the Bill means that it would need to be used for life. I think the Government should have more reassurances to give law-abiding people than silence.

I said that I strongly admired the aspiration of the Bill. For the sake of all those who are entangled in a lethal addiction, I would like to see smoking stop in this country, so I am not standing here on ideological grounds. I am making sensible points about whether the Bill is going to work. We have had—rightly—a wide-ranging, reflective and constructive debate, but good intentions and heroic ambitions are not enough. If we are to do something very novel and use the power of legislation to do it, we need to have confidence that the legislation is workable. I hope that my fellow legislators will rise to the challenges that are presented by this idea, and will scrutinise it carefully.

5.25 pm

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): There is clearly a fair amount of agreement in the House about what we are trying to achieve. No one is suggesting that smoking is anything other than very bad for people's health, and no one is suggesting that we should encourage anyone to smoke. We know that, for instance, it poses specific dangers to children. There is common ground—a common goal—when it comes to where we want to end up with the Bill. However, I believe that a generational ban is the wrong approach. There is a general assumption in the House that we ensure that laws apply equally to all adults, but the Bill turns that general assumption on its head by creating bizarre, absurd circumstances in which people will be unable to enjoy the same rights as others who are a day older than them.

No other country in the world has implemented such provisions. Many have considered doing so—New Zealand, Malaysia and Australia have been mentioned—but all of them have decided not to. Either they have all got it wrong and we have got it right, or that is not the case, and I doubt that it is the case. This is a classic instance of the “nanny knows best” approach to politics, which is incredibly patronising, and will be increasingly patronising, to adults.

One of the absurdities of what is, as I have said, an absurd piece of legislation has not been mentioned so far. The snuffbox by the Principal Doorkeeper's chair is paid for by him, so that Members of Parliament who wish to partake of the snuff can do so. In future, any MP who enters the House, and who is currently 15 years

old or younger, will not be able to do that; indeed, the Doorkeeper will be committing a criminal offence if he or she provides snuff for that MP.

We all want to reduce smoking rates, but this Bill is not the way to do it. The way to do it is through education and the provision of alternatives such as vapes. The Government's “swap to stop” scheme was brilliant—thousands of people have given up smoking as a consequence of it—and many other Government initiatives have been tremendously effective in helping smokers to quit. I pay tribute to the Government for all those achievements, but we should nevertheless look at what is happening in other countries. It is a shame that my right hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) is no longer in the Chamber. He mentioned Sweden, and it is because Sweden has been enthusiastic about allowing people alternatives to tobacco that it currently has the lowest smoking rate in the world and, moreover, the lowest rate of lung cancer in the world. It is not a coincidence. Although I accept that there are difficulties with making comparisons between different countries, Turkey and Indonesia, where smoking rates are increasing, are two of the countries that have completely banned vaping. In her opening speech, the Secretary of State rightly mentioned that the smoking rate among young people in Australia is currently going up. In Australia, vapes are banned—that is not a coincidence either.

Vaping helps adult smokers to quit and thereby saves lives. We all want the same thing: fewer smokers. In order to achieve that, we need to ensure that our legislation is flexible. I am grateful to the Secretary of State for agreeing that a consultation on flavours will take place, which is very important. I was going to table an amendment to make sure that that happened, but there is no necessity to do so now because of her commitment to the House. Flavours are important, because what often happens when smokers give up smoking and start vaping instead is that, a couple of weeks down the line, they get a bit fed up with the vaping they are carrying out, so they either go back to tobacco or switch to a different flavour. Therefore, having a variety of flavours is very important. I totally concede that having a zingy bubble gum flavour vape is wrong. We should not have any kind of marketing that makes vaping attractive to children, but we should have a choice for adult smokers who wish to switch to vaping.

We have two types of vaping going on in this country at the moment. First, there is the vaping that is being carried out by smokers who want to stop smoking, and who are vaping as a substitute for the tobacco they were previously consuming. Secondly, there is the other kind of vaping: children using it for fun. We need to tackle that robustly, but we do not need to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

When carried out by adults, vaping saves lives and relieves the burden on the NHS. If we care about the NHS—I am sure that everybody in this Chamber does—allowing for vaping to take place as an alternative to smoking must be the right way. There is a danger that this House could send out a perception that vaping is just as bad as tobacco. If it does that, many people will think, “What's the point in vaping? I might as well smoke instead if they are as bad as each other.” They are not as bad as each other. Vaping is considerably safer than consuming tobacco, although we do not want children who are non-smokers to take it up.

5.32 pm

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): This is quite basic for me. I see the Bill as an opportunity to change the life chances and the life course of thousands of children in the Stroud district, with my two little girls included in the mix. It is not perfect, but it enhances the chance for their little lungs and healthy bodies to grow up to be strong adults.

Like many, I am intuitively against banning things and state interventions. I have concerns about the implementation, practicalities and enforcement of the Bill, but I am less interested in hearing colleagues slagging off each other to help sell books, and more interested in the really spirited debate we have had and in challenges from people such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), because the amendments that could be tabled for forthcoming debates will help us.

At the heart of this legislation is this great Parliament using the knowledge and evidence that tobacco causes harm, which has built up over decades and decades. When we know that smoking cigarettes is addictive, expensive and limits life chances, particularly for the poorest, why should we accept the status quo and hope for a natural evolution? We know that smoking affects life opportunities and that youngsters are still smoking, despite everything we have done so far and those awful pictures on cigarette packs. When we know all of that, why would we not want to do more?

On the health of the nation, the NHS clearly needs reform. I know that politicians get shot down in flames for saying that, but it is the reality. The combination of an ageing population and the billions of pounds provided year after year in taxpayers' cash, which is never enough, means that serious change is required. So, notwithstanding my concerns about this legislation, I view the measures in this Bill as part of a genuinely bold and preventive strategy that we have not seen before. This is from a Prime Minister who is known to be characteristically thoughtful and into the detail, the data and the evidence, so I applaud the PM for taking a battering on this in order to try to do the right thing and prevent known harms to children and to young people's futures. Children in Stroud, in Gloucestershire and beyond will benefit from this Bill as they are growing up.

All six Gloucestershire MPs have the joy and benefit of meeting our health experts on a regular basis. They give us a hard time and we give them a hard time; they are rarely really happy with the Government on all bases, but they have told us that this policy is one of the most important public health interventions that any Government can make. The health experts also wrote to us to say that they wholeheartedly support the plan to create a smoke-free generation. They said:

"The legislation is needed, and proportionate. Smoking is the leading cause of preventable ill health and death and the major driver of differences between rich and poor...In Gloucestershire, the smoking prevalence in the most deprived quintile of the county is 22% and as many as over 30% of those in routine and manual employment".

That is about 25,000 people in our little county. The doctors went on to say:

"Furthermore, smoking is the leading cause of 10-20 year reduction in life expectancy in people with serious mental illness, of whom 38% of those in our county are addicted to tobacco. Progression towards a smoke free future will significantly improve

the health and well being of those currently in the most adverse circumstances, with nearly 26,000 tobacco dependent households in the county".

A note to the self-proclaimed freedom fighters: we all love freedom, but addicts are not free. They have very limited choices. Two thirds of those who try smoking will go on to continue to smoke for the rest of their lives. That was my bit, by the way, about the freedom fighters. It was not our learned doctors who said that. They did, however, say:

"This legislation has the potential to avoid the 4,653 hospital admissions and 690 premature deaths in Gloucestershire which occur as a result of smoking. Whilst this is a novel policy, there is no reason to think it cannot be successfully implemented."

I do not accept that the UK cannot implement the policy. They went on:

"The legislation will have a profound impact on society, as transformative as smokefree legislation was more than a decade ago. It is possible to conceive of a future where smoking no longer addicts and kills thousands of people every year."

I would like to thank Dr Charlie Sharp, our former chief exec Deborah Lee, Dr Richard Makins, Sheema Rahman, Professor Mark Pietroni and the many others who gave me the most structured and sensible part of my speech. They know, because they see this stuff every day. My mum is a nurse, and she sees it. We can do this, so let us not talk this Parliament and this country down when it comes to implementing tricky things. I am looking forward to the next stages.

5.38 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): My dad used to smoke 60 John Player Specials a day. When he died in 2009, the last 20 years of his life had been blighted by heart attacks, by strokes and by dementia—the things that we know now, and we knew then, are exacerbated not by free human choice but by the fact that smoking is an addiction. Nobody chooses to smoke 60 cigarettes a day. Addiction forces them to do so, and it hits the poorest hardest. Tobacco ruins lives. Smoking takes away the rational, free, human choices that so many people in this Chamber have defended today. Defending smoking is not defending rational, free, human choices; it is defending addiction, which is the very opposite.

Every day when we come to this place, we should ask ourselves one question: how can I as a Member of Parliament, how can we as a Parliament and how can the Government do things that make the lives of our constituents better, healthier, happier, freer? Most of the time, I think that Parliament and the Government should get out of the way. There are even days when I think that what we can do most is not say anything. However, we have to ask ourselves: what are the things that government can do? There are some things that only government can do.

I will let you into a secret, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Ronald Reagan quote that

"The...most terrifying words in the English language are: I'm from the government, and I'm here to help"

was a joke. Ronald Reagan was being slightly glib when he said that. The real most terrifying words in the English language might perhaps be that there is no government—that there is no operation above our individual choices to protect us, to give us security, and to fulfil the single most important function of government: security.

Security in terms of health is just as important, because the Government exist to make people's lives happier and healthier.

People might think that Governments are a necessary evil, or that they are a brilliant thing that can expand ever greater, but whatever we think, we do not improve people's lives by getting out of the way all the time. Tobacco does not have some unique special status. We should ask ourselves why, as a Parliament, we have agreed that it is right to have speed limits, seatbelts and motorcycle helmets yet somehow people make a different argument for tobacco. That just does not make sense.

Some people will say that this Bill is not perfect, and they are right because nothing is, but if people vote against this Bill, or even abstain, they must demonstrate how it would make the current situation worse, and I cannot see a single example of how it would do so. Some might say that it makes some shops unviable; well, if the viability of a business depends on tobacco, I do not think that it is good for this country for that to be a viable business. Some will say that it fuels the black market. That does not seem to me to be an argument at all. We do not legalise crime for fear of it being driven underground; we in the Conservative party put 20,000 extra police officers on the streets. We fund what we need to do to tackle it.

Many have said that the problem is a 34-year-old in a shop being told, "I am terribly sorry, but you're not 35." The reality of this approach, and why it is the right approach, is that by the time today's 14, 15 or 16-year-olds are 34 or 35, it simply will not be viable for those shops to be selling tobacco. It is a way of driving something—a bad thing—out of our society. That can only be a good thing.

An addicted life is not a free life. The spurious grounds cited for objecting to this Bill have not demonstrated what needs to be demonstrated: that this Bill would make things worse. The social contract that gives us legitimacy in this place is a balance. We have done some things recently that have tested that balance, and today we have a chance to show the 60% or so people who support this Bill that we are on their side. Government should not always be allergic to doing things that are popular, because when push comes to shove, yes of course people love freedom, but to exercise that freedom, people need to be alive.

I come back to where I started—to my dad. The last 20 years of his life were scarred by strokes, heart attacks and dementia, all exacerbated by smoking. That was not a free life; it was a life destroyed by addiction for precious little pleasure and a lot of money. We need the freedom to live longer, healthier, happier lives, with fewer people dying needlessly. That is what this Bill can do for us today.

I cannot understand why someone would vote against it. I cannot understand why they would be indifferent to it. What we should do, surely, is answer the question in front of us as best we can. I cannot help but think that if someone is voting against this today, they cannot see the human wood for the ideological trees. We have the answer. For all the high-flown arguments about the nanny state, the beginning and the end of this debate should be very simple: will people live longer, healthier, happier lives? Will they be alive? The Bill will deliver that. I commend it to the House.

5.43 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): As a former public health Minister, and a current vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health, I am delighted to speak in this landmark debate today and to support the measures in this Bill. Today, the UK takes another significant step towards becoming smoke-free, which will safeguard the health and wellbeing of millions of people across the country from the threat of smoking-related diseases.

I begin by taking Members back more than 60 years to the start of this marathon debate—not that many of us can remember 1962. This was a time when leading political figures such as Harold Wilson and Tony Benn openly smoked during interviews; when we were told that our doctor's cigarette of choice was a Camel; and when a young American actor named Ronald Reagan, whom my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) has just mentioned, appeared in glossy ads encouraging people to send special Christmas cartons of Chesterfields to all their friends instead of a traditional card.

1962 was also the year when the UK's relationship with smoking changed. A crucial report published by the Royal College of Physicians shed light on the devastating consequences of smoking and urgently called on the Government to tackle smoking. This seminal report paved the way for numerous groundbreaking reforms, including health warnings on packs and a ban on smoking in public places.

In more recent years, Government policy to tackle the rise of smoking has largely focused on increasing tobacco duty. However, although a packet of 20 king-size cigarettes has risen from £1.68 in 1990 to around £17 in 2024, taxation alone has not solved the problem, with 12.9% of the overall population, and 14% of the population of my Erewash constituency, still continuing to smoke.

The impetus for the Government to act now through new legislation to create a smoke-free generation cannot be clearer. Smoking is the UK's single biggest preventable killer. It causes 15 different types of cancer, and it is linked to cardiovascular disease, strokes, diabetes and dementia, as well as reducing life expectancy in Derbyshire by an estimated eight years.

Smoking puts huge pressure on the NHS, with someone being admitted to hospital with a smoking-related condition almost every minute in England, resulting in 400,000 admissions every year. Tobacco use in England costs billions of pounds in lost productivity and in health and social care costs. ASH estimates that the total cost of smoking, including productivity loss, social care costs and health costs, is £91.8 million in my Erewash constituency.

The Tobacco and Vapes Bill represents a bold and necessary response to this public health crisis, and it is a direct result of the review that Javed Khan carried out while I was public health Minister. The measures he proposes will, without doubt, save tens of thousands of lives and save the health system billions of pounds, and they will save an entire generation, including in Erewash, from addiction.

Regardless of party politics, as my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness said, we all enter this place with the honourable intention of making life better for the people we represent. I recently met students from Dovedale Primary School in my constituency, and

[Maggie Throup]

we discussed the idea of increasing the age of tobacco sales by one year every year. The students unanimously backed this measure. By supporting this legislation and ensuring that children turning 15 or younger this year, including all those Dovedale Primary School students, will never be legally sold cigarettes, we have a golden opportunity to deliver on that promise of making life better for our constituents. If we do not, how could we ever again go into schools in our constituencies and look those children and young people in the eye?

Another objection raised by critics of the Bill and by tobacco manufacturers is that the cost of smoking to the public finances is far less than tobacco tax revenues. This is just not the case. Lost productivity, healthcare costs and social care expenditure paint a stark picture of the true cost of smoking to the public finances. ASH estimates that, in 2019, lost productivity in England due to smoking cost £14 billion, in addition to a £3 billion cost to the NHS and social care. Tobacco excise tax revenues for the whole UK were under £9 billion in 2019, so the financial burden imposed by smoking far outweighs any tax revenues raised by tobacco sales.

As I have already mentioned, the Khan review outlines that vaping is an effective tool to help people quit smoking. Although I agree with that analysis, many young people are being given these nicotine products and are becoming addicted. This is all down to a clever ploy by tobacco manufacturers. Today, the vaping industry is applying similar tactics to those used by big tobacco in 1962. Vapes are increasingly being marketed as fashion accessories, and the Bill will tackle this directly by regulating the packaging of vaping and nicotine products, which will also reduce the appeal and attractiveness of vaping and nicotine products to children and young people. Can the Minister confirm that the Government have considered a total ban on the sale of tobacco and vaping products within a defined radius of schools, as I am sure that would have a huge impact?

Finally, on the illicit vaping market, our efforts to combat smoking and vaping must extend the legal market to tackle that side of things. We have all heard stories of criminal gangs exploiting the market and selling vapes containing synthetic Spice. Only last week, King's College London published a report by Dr Caroline Copeland that outlined the fact that so-called zombie drugs have been found in fake vapes. Once again, may I ask the Minister what she is doing to tackle that dangerous aspect of the vaping market?

To conclude, this is our 1962 moment. As parliamentarians, we have an opportunity to end smoking once and for all, ensuring that future generations are protected. Some may argue that now is not the time to legislate on this matter. I say, if not now, when? The Tobacco and Vapes Bill is the single biggest public health intervention in a generation, and 66% of adults across Great Britain support the legislation. Now is the time for colleagues across the House to back the Bill for the sake of public health, the economy and our NHS.

5.51 pm

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): I have spent four years in this position, and as with most things in life, the more time we spend doing a job, the better we get at it. I feel that is true in this place, and I hope that the Whips on the Front Bench agree.

My understanding of what it means to be a legislator has been on a steep learning curve. How I look at policy has changed during my time here. I have concluded that, as an MP who is guided by his Christian faith, I should apply to all policies three simple tests: is the policy Conservative, is it needed and is it enforceable? I applied those tests to the Bill. On the first test, sadly I do not think the policy is Conservative. I understand banning drugs. I understand banning drinking and driving. I understand banning smoking in pubs. But to ban the use of a legal product for someone born in 2009, but not for someone born in 2008, seems a little too far overreaching.

The policy also creates the nanny state that I and many others speak about, which has so many implications. Where does it end? Obesity is killing as many people as smoking, so are we to ban McDonalds, KFC, Dunkin' Donuts and chocolate? Alcohol is another killer. Do we ban that too? What about driving accidents? Do we ban motorbikes and fast cars? What about fires? Do we ban candles? What about Scotland's law on supposed hate speech? Someone's words offend, so we ban free speech. On the first test—is it Conservative?—sadly, I think not.

The next test is whether it is needed. I believe that the Prime Minister's intentions are honourable. Smoking kills many people many years before their time. Often they suffer a slow and painful death. I am campaigning hard for a new hospital in Doncaster, so I visit Doncaster Royal Infirmary fairly often. One of the saddest sights is patients standing outside the hospital, often in their dressing gowns, in all weathers, smoking. It is a bizarre sight. They are there to get better, yet they are sadly killing themselves at the same time. I am sure this is replicated across the country. Smoking is not a nice habit. It costs a fortune, and it results in bad breath, clothes that stink, yellow teeth and yellow fingers. At one time, many people thought that it was fashionable to smoke, but we are all clear now that it is not. Is this Bill needed? Let us just say I can understand why many think it is.

Thirdly, is it enforceable? That is another difficulty with the Bill. As I have said before, we are quick to make legislation but often we are simply not enforcing the legislation we already have in place. Many of our streets have issues with the use of banned substances and illegal activities. The use of cannabis is often ignored, even though we can smell it on many streets. Prostitution is illegal but that is often ignored. Quad bikes on our streets may not be ignored, but they are often difficult to deal with. Are we going to spend time prosecuting shop assistants for selling cigarettes to a 35-year-old when their 36-year-old friend can still buy them? I think not. I understand the hope that by then the 35-year-old will not want to smoke, but banning something often creates an unregulated black market, often turning law-abiding citizens into criminals, which is never a good thing to do.

As far as my three tests go, this legislation only really passes one of them, and I therefore struggle to support it. To go back to my first point, is the Bill Conservative? More importantly, is it more evidence of the creation of the nanny state? I believe so. If we take more and more decisions away from adults, then more adults will continually rely more and more on the state to make decisions for them. That is not a good thing and sadly will only create more powerful Governments and weaker individuals.

This thought reminded me of a video I watched recently, and I want to read what the gentleman in it said—his words, not mine:

“My grandfather walked 10 miles to work every day. My father walked five. I’m driving a Cadillac. My son is in a Mercedes. My grandson will be in a Ferrari. But my great grandson will be walking again. Why is that? Tough times create strong people. Strong people create easy times. Easy times create weak people. Weak people create tough times.”

Many will not understand, but we have to raise warriors. Nanny states do not raise warriors; they create weak individuals. As the man said, weak individuals create tough times. I want a society to help raise warriors as I believe, going forward, we are going to need as many as we can find, smokers or not.

Finally, is it Christian to support or not support the Bill? I am sure there are arguments on both sides. But we start each day in this place by saying the Lord’s prayer. We ask our Lord,
“lead me not into temptation.”

We do not ask Him to take temptation away. No, I think our Lord wants us to be warriors too, to be able to withstand the many temptations this world offers. I also think He wants us to make decisions, not sit on the fence. I therefore cannot abstain, which I believe would be the easy option.

I will therefore be voting against the Bill, not because I want young people to smoke—I do not—but because I want them to be warriors who can say no to the many temptations they may face. I want to educate them to rely on themselves to make the right decisions, and not to rely on the state to make decisions for them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. There are more people here than I was expecting, so I hope we can limit our remarks to about five minutes each, please.

5.58 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I rise to support the Bill and to make two declarations. First, I chair the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health. The group’s objective is to encourage people who smoke to give up and young people not to take up smoking at all in the first place, which the Bill aims to achieve. My second declaration is personal. I do not want anybody else to go through what I went through, which was seeing my two parents dying of cancer—a smoking-related disease. I well remember my late mother, at the age of 47, gasping for her last breath. She had been smoking since she was 12. At the time, smoking was almost encouraged by doctors and the medical fraternity, as the implication was that it was a good thing to do.

I want to see a smoke-free generation. We have the opportunity to achieve that now. New Zealand was going to be at the forefront of this effort, but has decided not to go ahead, which means that we can now be in the vanguard of creating the first smoke-free generation in the world. However, the stakes could not be higher. Research from University College London says that 350 young people between the ages of 18 and 25 take up smoking every day. That means that 50,000 young people have taken up smoking since the Government first announced their proposals. They will face a lifetime of addiction and early death as a result.

Relatively few people in my constituency smoke—the numbers are way below average rates. None the less, smoking-related diseases accounted for 1,300 hospital admissions in the year before the pandemic. People suffer the same inequalities as a result. Some say that if we implement these measures we will not have the taxation coming into the Treasury, but in 2023, smoking cost the economy £21 billion. That is more than double the revenue that the Government get from tobacco levies. Some say that people who die early are doing us a favour by not being an imposition on the national health service. That is absolutely outrageous. We want people to live longer and healthier lives.

Let me make this clear for all those who believe in freedom of choice. I am a dyed-in-the-wool Conservative and I believe in free choice, but the only free choice that a person makes if they take up smoking is to take that first cigarette, because after that they are addicted for life; the craving is there. Although most adult smokers want to give up, the reality is that it takes 30 attempts to succeed. Only one in 10 smokers achieve that each year. Therefore, if a person smokes, they will die a horrible death, probably as a result of a smoking-related disease.

This Bill has the opportunity of creating a smoke-free generation and of making sure that young people do not get addicted in the first place. If they wish to take up smoking when they are an adult that is their choice—their free choice—but, importantly, this Bill does not criminalise those people who smoke at the moment for either purchasing or using tobacco. The legal obligation will be on the retailers not to sell tobacco to those who are underage.

Like many people, I am concerned about the number of young people taking up vaping. The reality is that we do not yet have the evidence of what that will do to their lungs in the future. We know that it will get them addicted to nicotine, which is the most addictive drug known to man or woman. Once they are addicted to some form of nicotine, the temptation is to go further. We do not know what damage is being done to people’s lungs by the delivery mechanism of vaping, but medical evidence on that will emerge. It is important that we take action now rather than waiting to see what happens.

There is clear public support for these measures. Sixty nine per cent. of the public, including more than half of all smokers, back the Prime Minister’s age of sale proposal. There is support for the Bill across the political parties. The majority of people who vote for each of our parties across the Chamber support this proposal, and that should not come as a great surprise, because no one wants to see their children or grandchildren become addicted.

Sadly, big tobacco is fighting back. Tobacco companies have even attempted to classify themselves as allies of public health. Philip Morris International threatened to take legal action against the Government to delay the legislation. I am not sure what it thinks it is saying with its new corporate slogan, “Delivering a smoke-free future” when its whole aim is to get people addicted in the first place. The other reality is that big tobacco has been trying to get many of its products, such as heat-not-burn and cigars, exempted from the Bill—exemptions that would undermine the Bill before it even takes effect. Those products still contain tobacco and harmful products, and still cause damage to people’s health. We cannot allow those exemptions to happen. Another thing that

[*Bob Blackman*]

we should change is the current exemption for cigarillos from standardised packaging laws—maybe we could consider that as the legislating take place.

The other reality that I want to mention is the discrepancies between Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England. Scotland has a clear requirement for retailers to identify people by their age. I welcome that, as it is the right thing to do. As it stands, the Bill does not appear to require that in Wales or in England. I hope that we can amend the Bill as it goes through Committee to allow the provision that exists in Scotland—we should support what they have done there—to apply in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

I know that you require me to sit down, Madam Deputy Speaker, but this is a subject that I have been passionate about for rather a long time. The reality is that the smoking ban back in 2007 was led from the Back Benches. Indeed, many Labour Ministers voted against the tobacco ban—

Steve Brine: Including the Deputy Prime Minister.

Bob Blackman: Including the Deputy Prime Minister. From that ban through to the 2015 progress on tobacco control, such measures have consistently come from the Back Benches. In fact, colleagues from across the House have helped to implement many of them. I am delighted that the all-party parliamentary group's recommendations have been included in the Khan review. I thank the Prime Minister for going even further than what we asked for, which was a rise in the age of sale to create a smoke-free generation by raising the age of sale by one year every year. The reality is that tobacco control measures have consistently passed through this Chamber and the other with overwhelming support from across parties every single time they have been proposed. I am confident that this Bill will be no different.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I must impose a time limit of five minutes.

6.7 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The Bill sets two important principles crashing against each other: on the one hand, the principle of personal freedom, and on the other, the responsibility of a Government to act on public health. We are really lucky to live in a country that treasures personal freedom, and we should be careful of bans that take freedoms away.

However, smoking is the biggest preventable killer and costs the NHS and the economy billions every year. Most people who smoke wish that they had never started in the first place—that they had never had that choice—and I agree with them. I have lost weight, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I took a decision six months ago to give up alcohol, but that was far easier than giving up nicotine. People value the choice to make silly decisions. When they were told that they should not eat an easter egg all in one go, there was a public backlash. Given that this is about personal choice, I think it right that this be a free vote.

However, when I thought about the free vote, I realised that this does not really affect me; it affects young people, who have a right to be heard. That is why I wrote to secondary schools in my constituency to ask young people for their views. I am really grateful for the detailed feedback from three of those schools. I will not mention which schools, because they gave me their confidence and I do not want them to get in trouble with their peers.

One group reported back that the general consensus was that a ban was a good thing, and another said that they had mixed views. A third group sent me detailed comments from every single year 12 and 13 student of politics. In that group, the number of students supporting the Bill's measures was more than double those who did not. The majority is even greater for the part of the Bill about vapes than for the part about tobacco. The children commented that the brightly coloured flavoured vapes are targeted at young people. They also worry about the environmental impact, especially of disposable vapes, and would like to have stronger limitations on disposable products than on reusable ones. They recognised that vaping can help adults to quit smoking and raised the concern that stronger restrictions on vapes may cause some adults to return to smoking, but they are also concerned about the lack of knowledge of the long-term impacts of vaping, especially for young people. Other students pointed out that fixing a set date of birth for those who are able to buy tobacco seems somewhat arbitrary, feels unfair and could be difficult to enforce, especially as those people get older. Some raised concerns that younger people will still obtain products—both vapes and cigarettes—from older people or from illegal sources.

All the groups commented on the need for enforcement measures, wisely pointing out that just passing a law in this House does not necessarily change behaviour. I was pleased that the Health Secretary said that local authorities will be able to keep the proceeds of fines in order to enforce this law. Some students were also concerned about the challenges that enforcement will pose to retail workers—the Government's new proposal to introduce a specific offence of assaulting a retail worker may go some way to addressing those concerns. The final point, which I thought was really important to mention, was that some young people were concerned that if these products are banned, other items that are potentially even more dangerous will take over.

All those points have been mentioned individually by many colleagues in today's debate, and every single one of them was considered by the young people in my constituency. I was deeply impressed by the thought they gave to the matter: they value freedom and choice, but when asked for their views, the majority of the young people of Chelmsford who responded said that they would support the measures in the Bill. It was not a unanimous opinion, and I respect those who did not agree, but in a democracy, the majority views are those that prevail. Therefore, out of respect for the majority view of the young people in my constituency—who will be affected by this Bill much more than any of us—I am going to vote for the Bill today, because it is their views on the Bill that will matter.

6.11 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): What a fascinating afternoon of different speeches. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) has just indicated,

there are two very different ways of approaching the Bill. It is very much a personal matter: tonight's vote is not whipped, and therefore all of us will have our different perceptions, but I start by saying that we are not all here—as one Member said—to try to prevent restrictions on human activity. I do not see that as the reason I was sent to this House, but surely we were all sent here to try to achieve a better future for the children and grandchildren of our constituents. Once we have all agreed on that, we can discuss whether a ban on children smoking now that will, in time, mean a ban on everyone smoking is a wonderful way of preventing what is not a liberty but an addiction, or whether taking away that freedom is just a slippery slope towards taking away all other freedoms.

Of course, although we cannot measure precisely the future damage of allowing people to carry on as they have been—being able to do themselves considerable damage—we know that the NHS calculates that the current financial cost of smoking is £17 billion a year. For those of us who are also concerned about the size of the state, the use of resources, the productivity of the NHS, and the ability of our constituents to have elective surgery when they want it and to see doctors when they wish to, this is surely a huge opportunity to make a massive difference—not just to future generations' potential to avoid addiction to tobacco, but to their ability to get the health services that they want at a cost that this country can afford. That is the crux of what we have been discussing today.

It is very interesting to me that all the doctors in the House and all the health professionals in our constituencies—as my neighbour and hon. Friend, the wonderful Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie), has highlighted in Gloucestershire—are absolutely united that this is one of the single most important and useful interventions that this House could make. It is a huge credit to this Prime Minister that he has set out a vision with clarity and pursued it with determination, and is absolutely clear that were this House to vote this Bill through, it would be part of whatever legacy he leaves in the future, as a politician keen to make a difference.

I believe the idea that, on the contrary, encouraging worse health outcomes should continue because it somehow benefits people's freedoms would be a valid one only if the whole business of smoking was harmless and largely cost-free, and we know that that simply is not the case. We have heard the data and the calls: 75,000 GP appointments a month, 690 premature deaths in the Gloucester Royal Hospital alone, and every minute of every day a new patient somewhere in a hospital in the UK because of smoking. We cannot argue that the freedom to smoke and to be addicted comes cost-free, and I cannot imagine opposing a Bill that supports better health and better life outcomes. For the libertarians, it will in fact help to reduce the size and cost of the state. Therefore all these things are fundamentally Conservative goals. In fact, they are not even just Conservative goals, but surely human goals that all of us in this House can share.

In all this, we do not need to think too much about a nanny state—none of us is keen on the phrase “nanny state” or the concept—but how many people here would stand up and vote to take away safety belts in cars, or suggest that everyone could drive motorbikes without a helmet? I believe that what may seem like a slight

increase in bureaucracy will, in a few years' time, be seen as so obvious that we will all be astonished there was any opposition at all. I believe strongly that protecting children, just as we banned children from being chimney sweeps in generations gone by, by banning them from smoking for future generations is exactly what a progressive Conservative Government should do. This Bill, if passed, will be one of the most far-reaching laws that this Government and this Parliament have made. I am absolutely convinced—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order.

6.16 pm

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): I support the Bill's aim to create the first smoke-free generation. It is bold and visionary, and I support it.

I want to use my time to make four short points. It will not surprise you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the first one concerns the new city of Southend. My vision is to make the city of Southend safer, healthier and wealthier for all, but the incidence of smoking in Southend is a real barrier to that vision. In 2022, the rate of smoking in Southend was estimated to be over 14%, which is 1.5% higher than the national average. What is even more concerning is that the 2022 figure is 3% higher than the 2021 figure. Although it is laudable that smoking rates have been consistently declining in the UK for the past 40 years, the reality is that in some of our coastal cities—and, sadly, Southend is one of them—the rates are still too high and are even rising. I am delighted that the Prime Minister has sought to tackle this issue, and anything that makes the next generation of Southenders healthier certainly has my backing.

I am delighted that the Bill tackles vaping. As we have heard, recent research shows that nearly a quarter of children use vapes, with more than 10% in secondary schools describing themselves as regular users. Vaping is much more concerning because we simply do not yet know the long-term effects, but what we do know is alarming. We know that vaping-related hospital admissions almost doubled in 2022, with 32 of those cases involving children. Bearing in mind that cigarettes were once considered to be perfectly safe, as we have heard, I believe it is simply not responsible to fail to act to stop young people becoming hooked on these products.

However, like others I have a number of concerns about how the Bill will work in practice. There are only 5,000 trading standards officers around the country. How can such a small number ensure that the ban on the sale of these products is enforced? Just as importantly, as this Bill is currently drafted, if someone were to go abroad on a trip and come back with a pack of 200 Marlboro Gold—apparently only £37 at the current duty-free rate—there is nothing to stop them smoking them or giving them to others because they have not bought them, so that has to be tackled as well.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), I have engaged with my local students. My last cohort of work experience students, all with an interest in politics, were very interested in this policy. Students from Westcliff High School for Girls, Southend High School for Girls, Southend High School for Boys and the King Edmund School all support the aim of the Bill, but they too raise a number of intelligent concerns. They want to know how shops that already sell illegal

[Anna Firth]

and unregulated nicotine products will be dealt with when they add illegal vapes. They want to know how people well into adulthood will be identified for nicotine products—how will shops tackle that? They strongly support the banning of disposable vapes, particularly for environmental reasons, but they are much more concerned about cracking down on the under-age vaping that is already happening than banning future vape purchases. Finally, they raised considerable concerns about the potential for a black market in nicotine products. They pointed out the prevalence of unregulated products cut with even worse substances in the illicit drug market, and they fear we might be opening the door for this to happen with nicotine products as well.

I support the principle of the ban. This is about protecting the long-term health of young people in our country and I will be voting for it, but we must address the real concerns expressed by the very young people the Bill has been introduced to protect.

6.22 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I am not naturally inclined to want to ban things—I lean towards the Government intervening as little as possible and only when absolutely necessary—so I have thought long and hard about this Bill and whether to support it, and I have come to the conclusion that I will vote for it tonight.

The first reason for that is that although I have heard the arguments put forward by some today about freedom, the simple fact is that people who are addicted to nicotine and smoking are not free. I have seen many people suffering with the addiction through their life and trying to give up smoking, and any notion that somehow people who are addicted to smoking are free is nonsense. If we can ever help people to avoid becoming addicted to smoking and nicotine, the Government should take action. The Bill tries to address that issue in a sensible and pragmatic manner and in the right way.

I have also heard it said today that somehow smoking is a matter of personal choice and freedom and it does not really affect anyone else. I would challenge people who say that to go and talk to any family—we have heard stories about this in the Chamber today—who have lost loved ones through long and painful deaths as a result of their smoking. There are victims of smoking beyond the person directly involved, in their family.

Smoking also puts huge pressure on our health systems and damages our economy. These are prices we all have to pay for the addiction to smoking that so many struggle with. When I read the statistic that 75,000 GP appointments a week are directly as a result of smoking, I was astounded. I am sure that all of our inboxes are full of messages from constituents saying they are struggling to see their GP, so we can see that a great difference would be made if we freed up that capacity in primary care. For those reasons I think it is right on this occasion for the Government to intervene.

On the point about shop workers having to check the age of someone in their 30s or 40s to establish whether they are eligible to buy tobacco, the reality is that it will not happen because the whole point of the measures is to stop people smoking in the first place. We know most

people start smoking when they are young, and by helping them to avoid ever starting when they are young we just will not have people in their 30s and 40s wanting to buy cigarettes. That is the point.

I also welcome the measures in the Bill on vaping. I have been incredibly concerned about the way vaping has taken hold of particularly young people in our country. I understand and acknowledge that it is a useful tool to help people to get off cigarettes by taking up vaping instead, but the reality is that it is now about so much more than that in our country. It is shameful how some of the vape manufacturers have deliberately tried to get young people addicted to vaping, so that they are locked into being their customers for the rest of their lives, just as the tobacco industry has done for too long. I therefore welcome the measures the Government are taking to try to make vaping less attractive to young people. I suggest that we need to go further. If we say that the main aim of vaping is to help people to get off smoking, why do we not also ban vapes for anyone born after 1 January 2009? If they will not ever smoke, they will not need vaping to get off smoking. That is one way we could go further to improve this Bill and prevent young people from ever taking up vaping in the first place. That would be incredibly welcome.

We do not know the long-term damage that vaping is doing to people. We are starting to see some of the evidence coming forward on the number of young people who end up in hospital as a result of vaping. I am deeply concerned that, just as with tobacco if it was being licensed today—with all that we know about the damage it does to people's lives—we probably would not license it or approve it for sale. I am concerned that we do not yet understand the long-term impact of vaping, and it will reap a damaging effect on young people's health.

The Bill is not perfect, but I acknowledge and respect the Prime Minister's aims in coming forward with something that is bold and will address this important issue in our society. I am happy to support the Bill this evening.

6.26 pm

James Grundy (Leigh) (Con): I rise in an unusual position, because I smoke like a chimney, but I will give the Government the benefit of the doubt tonight, even though I have concerns about the enforceability of some of the Bill's measures.

Those who are regular readers of the *Leigh Journal*—I realise that my audience might not include too many of those—will know that I have written repeatedly about the problem of illicit and illegal tobacco and vapes in Leigh. The simple truth is that there is real concern that a lot of these products are a means to money launder for the gangs who cause the heroin problem in Leigh and for the people smugglers. I have spoken in the *Leigh Journal* about how Leigh was one of the end points of an international smuggling gang based in the Balkans that used illicit tobacco and vapes as part of their criminal enterprise.

Some people have spoken today about how they do not think the Bill is right and will not support the Government. I will support the Government, but I will complain about the Bill too, because the Government must go further. If someone is selling illegal tobacco and vapes, they should be held accountable. If someone was selling beer or spirits made out of turpentine or toilet water, for example, people would be outraged and

there would be a demand for action, but that is happening day in, day out and week in, week out with illegal and counterfeit tobacco and vapes. Some products are made illegitimately to copy “legitimate” products in sweatshops in the far east, and some vapes contain up to 10 times the legal limit of nicotine. As some colleagues with medical knowledge have spoken about today, we simply do not know what damage that will do to young people.

The way we should go further is through a mechanism that we already have to license shops, which is the alcohol licensing scheme. We should expand that scheme, which is run by local authorities, to tobacco. It should be an alcohol and tobacco licence, so that someone cannot apply for one or the other, but has to apply for both. If someone is caught selling a dodgy £2 vape to a 14-year-old, they should have their licence taken away so that they can no longer sell alcohol either. I guarantee that that would basically clean up the system, because nobody will take the risk of selling a dodgy £2 vape to a 14-year-old and risk the loss of their ability to sell alcohol to a much wider pool of people. Those who do will, I suspect, be the organisations that are fronts for the drug dealers and people smugglers. We should also trigger an automatic investigation by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs into those people and follow back the chain of the dodgy vapes and dodgy tobacco to find out who they are. Not only should we take away their licences so that they cannot sell alcohol and tobacco; we should fine them, and not £50 as said earlier, but £10,000. Let us really go for this and teach those people a lesson, because the black market in tobacco and vapes already exists, and it is costing the Treasury millions. It is funding other criminal activity such as heroin dealing and people smuggling, so it must come to an end.

My only criticism of the Government with regard to the Bill is that it does not go far enough. We need more robust regulation, because a giant black market in tobacco and vapes is already there. It needs to be done through the existing licensing system for alcohol, and it needs to have concrete outcomes that will shut down the dodgy shops and cut off a source of funding for the dangerous criminal gangs who also operate in heroin dealing and people smuggling.

The Government have the right intention. I have doubts about some of the detail, but I will give them the benefit of the doubt. However, I urge them to strengthen the legislation; it would be to the benefit of us all if they did so. Let us deal with these criminal gangs while we deal with this public health issue, because I am afraid the two are deeply intertwined.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the shadow Minister.

6.31 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to respond to the debate on behalf of the Opposition. We have heard powerful contributions from Members on both sides of the House in favour of the Bill to bring an end to the smoking epidemic and crack down on vaping companies that are preying on kids. I thank the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sir Sajid Javid), my hon. Friends the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) and for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and the hon. Members for Winchester (Steve Brine), for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), for Erewash (Maggie Throup), for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) and for Stroud

(Siobhan Baillie) for their moving contributions on the harms of smoking and the importance of the Bill. Let me also thank my hon. Friends the Members for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon), for York Central, (Rachael Maskell) and for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for the excellent points they made about the growth in vaping.

We have also heard opposition to the Bill. The right hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Sir Jake Berry) cited the example of people openly taking class A drugs in public without reprimand as evidence that bans do not work. I dare say that he made more of a point about the decline in policing and local enforcement under his Government than about age-of-sale legislation. To the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), I simply say that if wanting to stop future generations from getting addicted to products that may eventually kill them makes us the health police, then the health police we are.

There is no argument about the harm that tobacco does to the people of this country every day. Smoking is the single biggest preventable cause of ill health. It leads to 80,000 deaths a year in the United Kingdom, and it is responsible for one in four cancer deaths and more than 70% of lung cancer cases. Smokers lose an average of 10 years of life expectancy. As we have heard, smoking is not a free choice; it is an addiction. Raising the age of sale will help to reduce pressure on the NHS by improving health and wellbeing.

My constituent Eric knows that too well. He is one of thousands of constituents whose lives have been put at risk by smoking. Like the vast majority of smokers, he began smoking when he was a child, at age 14. It was not until his 50s that he was able to give up cold turkey, at the request of his daughter, who urged him to do so on behalf of his newborn grandson. Eric has suffered a heart attack and stroke, and he lives with hypertension, high cholesterol and COPD. As he said:

“COPD is an incurable, mortal disease and makes getting around harder and harder for me.”

The experience of people like Eric is why the last Labour Government took radical action with the smoking ban in 2007: a defining public health achievement. It is also why, while in opposition, we welcomed the Khan review and proposed the generational smoking ban a full 10 months before the Prime Minister made his announcement at his party conference.

There is wide support for the Bill from everyone in the NHS, in the wider health sector and among the general public. The only people who seem to be fighting it tooth and nail are the tobacco companies and Conservative Back Benchers. The former Member for Blackpool South called it “health fascism”, and the former Prime Minister, whose chief of staff worked for Philip Morris and British American Tobacco, has called it “unConservative.” What is it about the tobacco industry that some Tory MPs love so much? Every year the NHS bails out big tobacco to the tune of billions. The Prime Minister might not feel he has the strength to take on those vested interests and whip his MPs to vote against them, but he can rest assured that if they cannot get it over the line, Labour will.

As welcome as this Bill is, the Government have had 14 years to take stronger action on smoking. Four years ago, the Government said that their ambition was a

[Preet Kaur Gill]

smoke-free Britain by 2030, but they are currently estimated to be at least seven years behind their Smokefree 2030 target and not on course to meet it in the poorest areas until 2044. The generational smoking ban will help us get there, but it will not help the 6 million to 7 million adults who already smoke.

As many Members have said, stop smoking services have faced savage cuts. The number of smokers who quit through stop smoking services has dropped from 400,000 a year in 2010 to around 100,000 today. Does the Minister regret not doing more to bring down smoking rates over the past 14 years? The Government have belatedly committed more funding to stop smoking services, but the uplift in funding that the Minister offers will not take us back to the number of people setting quitting dates that we achieved in 2010. What assurance can she offer that her measures will get the Government on course to hit the 5% smoke-free target by 2030?

The Bill is strong on tackling the take-up of cigarettes and vapes by young people, but it does little to help those already addicted to quit. Recently, a school in my constituency had to apologise after handing out a leaflet to a child that suggested smoking as a self-help measure. Does the Minister agree that it is scandalous that the myth that smoking reduces stress and anxiety still persists? Does she agree that her Bill should include a requirement to make tobacco companies include information to dispel that myth in their products?

The Bill also includes a range of powers to tackle youth vaping, which Labour welcomes. For years, Labour has been warning about the explosion of young people getting addicted to nicotine with products that look like teddy bears and sippy cups, and come in flavours like unicorn shake. That is why Labour voted to ban the marketing and branding of vapes to children in 2021. Once again, Labour leads and this Government belatedly follow. In the meantime, an estimated 255,000 more children aged 11 to 17 have become addicted to vapes, according to ASH survey data. Does the Minister regret taking so long to wake up to this issue?

According to the Chartered Trading Standards Institute, while youth vaping has soared, so has the number of illegal products flooding our market, as many Members have raised. Up to one in three vapes sold in shops is estimated to be illicit, which means that children are being exposed to vapes that contain heavy metals, antifreeze and poster varnish, as well illegal levels of nicotine getting them hooked for life. Will the Minister explain how she expects to bring in effective new regulations on vapes when her Government are barely in control of the black market now? Does she agree that a cross-Government strategy is needed to tackle the smuggling of potentially dangerous products into our country? Has she considered giving the MHRA new powers to screen products before they come on the market? Will she confirm that her Bill will provide powers to tackle not just the sale but the import of dangerous products?

To conclude, after 14 years of the Tories, healthy life expectancy has dropped for the first time in modern British history. Labour supports this Bill but, after 14 years of failure and with the NHS in crisis, we regret that it marks a last desperate attempt of this Government to rescue a legacy on public health. For 14 years they

have played politics with public health, putting off prevention measures, knowing that taxpayers tomorrow will pay the price. But the country is paying for this now. Labour will always put public health first, prioritise prevention to ease pressure on the NHS, improve access to smoking cessation services and take on the tobacco and vape companies that are profiting off people's health.

6.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dame Andrea Leadsom): I want to start by thanking the many lung cancer and asthma charities, particularly ASH, for their advice, research and support. I personally pay tribute to the chief medical officer for England for his commitment to making the strongest possible case for this life-changing legislation, and to Health Ministers across the UK for their collaboration in what will be a UK-wide solution for future generations.

I was very disappointed with the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), who opened for the Opposition. I have said it before and I will say it again: I like the hon. Gentleman. He once said on air that that was death to his career! Why would he have said that, Madam Deputy Speaker? But I am really disappointed today, because he was not listening. My hon. Friends had some very sensible questions about consultation, and they raised very serious points about flavours for vapes and how they might help adults to quit. He was not listening; he was making party political points. In fact, he barely said anything sensible about the legislation. All he did was talk politics. I appreciate the fact that Labour Members have been whipped to support the Bill. On my side, colleagues are trusted to make their own decisions on something that has always been a matter for a free vote. [Interruption.] He sits there shouting from a sedentary position, political point-scoring yet again.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) raised a very serious question about stop smoking services. I can tell her that the Government have allocated £138 million a year to stop smoking, which is more than doubling. The Government's commitment to helping adults to stop smoking is absolutely unparalleled.

I thank the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) for her support for the Bill, and for the collaborative approach of the Government in Scotland in their work bringing forward this collaboration among all parts of the United Kingdom.

I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), the Chair of the Health Committee for his excellent speech and his strong case for long-term policies that will prevent ill health and thereby reduce the pressures on the NHS, which is so important. He asked when we will see the regulations and the consultation on vaping flavours, packaging and location in stores. It is our intention to bring forward that consultation during this Parliament if at all practicable.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sir Sajid Javid) for his tribute to Dr Javed Khan for his excellent report into the terrible trap of addiction to nicotine. My right hon. Friend made the point that it is simply not a free choice, but the total opposite.

I thank the Liberal Democrats and their spokesman, the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), for saying that they will support the Bill on Second Reading. I am not quite sure where they are going on the smoking legislation, but I am grateful for their support on vaping. I hope to be able to reassure them during the passage of the Bill.

The case for the Bill is totally clear: cigarettes are the product that, when used as the manufacturer intends, will go on to kill two thirds of its long-term users. That makes it different from eating at McDonald's or even drinking—what was it?—a pint of wine, which one of my colleagues was suggesting. It is very, very different. Smoking causes 70% of lung cancer cases. It causes asthma in young people. It causes stillbirths, it causes dementia, disability and early death. I will give way on that cheery note.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I thank the Minister for giving way. I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a practising NHS consultant addiction psychiatrist. Does my right hon. Friend share my concern that what we have heard from the libertarian right today is a false equivalence between alcohol and bad dietary choices, and smoking, and that moderate alcohol and moderate bad eating are very different from moderate smoking, because moderate smoking kills. It means that people live on average 10 years less and it means less healthy lives. Does she agree that this is not about libertarianism but about doing the right thing, protecting public health and protecting the next generation, and that is why we should all support the Bill?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who makes such a powerful point and speaks with such authority. Similar points were made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), who as a paediatrician spoke with great expertise on this matter. It is absolutely true: it is a false choice. It is not a freedom of choice; it is a choice to become addicted and that then removes your choice.

Every year, more than 100,000 children aged between 11 and 15 light their first cigarette. What they can look forward to is a life of addiction to nicotine, spending thousands of pounds a year, making perhaps 30 attempts to quit, with all the misery that involves, and then experiencing life-limiting, entirely preventable suffering. Two thirds of them will die before their time. Some 83% of people start smoking before the age of 20, which is why we need to have the guts to create the first smoke-free generation across the United Kingdom, making sure that children turning 15 or younger this year will never be legally sold tobacco. That is the single biggest intervention that we can make to improve our nation's health. Smoking is responsible for about 80,000 deaths every year, but it would still be worth taking action if the real figure were half that, or even a tenth of it.

There is also a strong economic case for the Bill. Every year, smoking costs our country at least £17 billion, far more than the £10 billion of tax revenue that it draws in. It costs our NHS and social care system £3 billion every year, with someone admitted to hospital with a smoking-related illness almost every minute of every day, and 75,000 GP appointments every week for smoking-related problems. That is a massive and totally

preventable waste of resources. For those of us on this side of the House who are trying hard to increase access to the NHS and enable more patients to see their GPs, this is a really good target on which to focus. On the positive side, creating a smoke-free generation could deliver productivity gains of nearly £2 billion within a decade, potentially reaching £16 billion by 2056, improving work prospects, boosting efficiency and driving the economic growth that we need in order to pay for the first-class public services that we all want.

I know that hon. Members who oppose the Bill are doing so with the best of intentions. They argue that adults should be free to make their own decisions, and I get that. What we are urging them to do is make their own free decision to choose to be addicted to nicotine, but that is not in fact a choice, and I urge them to look at the facts. Children start smoking because of peer pressure, and because of persistent marketing telling them that it is cool. I know from experience how hard it is, once hooked, to kick the habit. I took up smoking at the age of 14. My little sister was 12 at the time, and we used to buy 10 No. 6 and a little book of matches and—yes—smoke behind the bicycle shed, and at the bus stop on the way home from school. [*Interruption.*] Yes, I know: I am outing myself here.

Having taken up smoking at the age of 14, I was smoking 40 a day by the age of 20, and as a 21st birthday present to myself I gave up. But today, 40 years later—I am now 60, so do the maths—with all this talk of smoking, I still feel like a fag sometimes. That is how addictive smoking is. This is not about freedom to choose; it is about freedom from addiction.

There is another angle. Those in the tobacco industry are, of course, issuing dire warnings of unintended consequences from the raising of the age of sale. They say that it will cause an explosion in the black market. That is exactly what they said when the age of sale rose from 16 to 18, but the opposite happened: the number of illicit cigarettes consumed fell by a quarter, and at the same time smoking rates among 16 and 17-year-olds in England fell by almost a third. Raising the age of sale is a tried and tested policy, and a policy that is supported not only by a majority of retailers—which, understandably, has been mentioned by a number of Members—but by more than 70% of the British public.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): If I had known that my right hon. Friend was such a keen smoker, I would not have recruited her to the Conservative party at the tender age of 18 when we were at university.

I have always taken a free-choice approach to health matters, and as shadow Children's Minister I had to lead on both the tobacco advertising ban and the public smoking ban. We were wrong to oppose them. Who would now think it remotely normal for people to be able to smoke around us in restaurants and other public places? Does my right hon. Friend not agree that in a few years' time this measure will seem just the same as banning smoking in public places, and people will ask why we did not do it earlier?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: As I have said ever since I met my hon. Friend at the age of 18, he is always right. I can never disagree with him.

[*Dame Andrea Leadsom*]

I want to say a few even more furious words about vaping. It is just appalling to see vapes being deliberately marketed to children at pocket-money prices and in bright colours, with fun packaging and flavours like bubble gum and berry blast, and with the vape counter right next to the sweet counter.

Sir Jake Berry: Before my right hon. Friend gets too furious about vaping, may I ask her to clarify two points on smoking? First, she said that because of the addictive nature of nicotine, it is extremely important that we stop people smoking from the age of 15. I do not support that, but if it is so important, why are we not starting at 17? It is already illegal for 17-year-olds to smoke. What is the magic of 15? If we really believe in the policy, why delay? Secondly, she spoke about her own experience, and I am a former smoker myself. She started smoking at 14, and I started smoking at about 14 as well. It was illegal when I started smoking at 14, but it did not stop me. I am a lawbreaker—how shocking. Why does she think that this ban on people starting smoking when under age will be different?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising those really important points. As I will come on to, we will be putting £30 million of new money each year into trading standards and our enforcement agencies to clamp down on enforcement, and we are making it illegal to sell cigarettes to anybody turning 15 this year. He asks why. It is precisely because we are trying to bring in the Bill with a decent amount of notice so that people can prepare for it, precisely to protect retailers and allow all the sectors that will be impacted to be able to prepare.

I come back to the area where I am seriously on the warpath: targeting kids who might become addicted to nicotine vapes. I went to Hackney to visit some retail shops, where I saw the vape counters right next to the sweet counters. I saw that it is absolutely not about me—it is not about trying to stop me smoking. It is about trying to get children addicted through cynical, despicable methods. Sadly, for too many kids, vapes are already an incredible marketing success. One in five children aged between 11 and 17 have now used a vape, and the number has trebled in the last three years.

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way as she ploughs through all of this. I wonder whether she can share her views on the advertising of vape products on sports kits and via sports facilities.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is aware that there is already very restrictive advertising for smoking and vaping. We are very concerned that some advertising is breaching advertising standards regulations, and I will write to retailers specifically about that.

Parents and teachers are incredibly worried about the effect that vapes are having on developing lungs and brains. The truth is that we do not yet know what the long-term impact will be on children who vape. Since I was appointed, I have done everything I can to ensure that this Bill will protect our children. The Government's position is clear: vaping is less harmful than smoking, but if you don't smoke, don't vape—and children should never vape.

We will definitely make sure that people who smoke today continue to have access to vapes as a quit aid, which will absolutely not change, but we cannot replace one generation that is hooked on nicotine in cigarettes with another that is hooked on nicotine in vapes. That is why we are using this Bill to take powers to restrict flavours and packaging, and to change how vapes are displayed in shops. To reassure the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee and my right hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Sir Jake Berry), we plan to consult on that before the end of the Parliament, if practicable. The disposable vapes ban will likely take effect in April 2025—those regulations have already been published.

These are common-sense proposals that strike the right balance between helping retailers to prepare, giving sufficient notice and protecting children from getting hooked on nicotine, while at the same time supporting current smokers to quit by switching to vapes as a less harmful quit aid, supported by £138 million a year. Our approach is realistic for those who smoke now and resolute in protecting children. I am convinced that, just like banning smoking in indoor public places and raising the age of sale to 18, these measures will seem commonsensical to all of us in 10 years' time. In decades to come, our great-grandchildren will look back and think: why on earth did they not do it sooner? I urge all right hon. and hon. Members to vote for this Bill as the biggest public intervention in history. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 383, Noes 67.

Division No. 123]

[6.56 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Adly</i>)	Blackman, Kirsty
Abrahams, Debbie	Blake, Olivia
Aiken, Nickie	Blomfield, Paul
Aldous, Peter	Bottomley, Sir Peter
Ali, Rushanara	Bowie, Andrew
Ali, Tahir	Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Amesbury, Mike	Brereton, Jack
Anderson, Fleur	Brine, Steve
Anderson, Stuart (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Brock, Deidre
Andrew, rh Stuart	Brown, Alan
Ansell, Caroline	Brown, Ms Lyn
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Browne, Anthony
Argar, rh Edward	Bruce, Fiona
Ashworth, rh Jonathan	Bryant, Sir Chris
Atkins, rh Victoria	Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Bacon, Gareth	Burgon, Richard
Baillie, Siobhan	Butler, Dawn
Baker, Duncan	Byrne, Ian
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Cadbury, Ruth
Barclay, rh Steve	Callaghan, Amy (<i>Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson</i>)
Barker, Paula	Cameron, Dr Lisa
Baron, Mr John	Carter, Andy
Beckett, rh Dame Margaret	Cartlidge, James
Begum, Apsana	Caulfield, Maria
Benn, rh Hilary	Chalk, rh Alex
Beresford, Sir Paul	Champion, Sarah
Betts, Mr Clive	Chapman, Douglas
Bhatti, Saqib	Charalambous, Bambos
Blackman, Bob	Cherry, Joanna
	Churchill, Jo
	Clark, Feryal

Clark, rh Greg	Ghani, Ms Nusrat	Kitchen, Gen	O'Hara, Brendan
Cleverly, rh James	Gibb, rh Nick	Kniveton, Kate	Olney, Sarah
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Gibson, Patricia	Lake, Ben	Onwurah, Chi
Colburn, Elliot	Gibson, Peter	Lammy, rh Mr David	Opperman, Guy
Cooper, Daisy	Gideon, Jo	Lamont, John	Oppong-Asare, Abena
Cooper, rh Yvette	Gill, Preet Kaur	Latham, Mrs Pauline	Osborne, Kate
Costa, Alberto	Glen, rh John	Lavery, Ian	Oswald, Kirsten
Crawley, Angela (<i>Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson</i>)	Glindon, Mary	Law, Chris	Owatemi, Taiwo (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Creasy, Stella	Goodwill, rh Sir Robert	Leadbeater, Kim	Owen, Sarah
Crosbie, Virginia	Gove, rh Michael	Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea	Pawsey, Mark
Cruddas, Jon	Graham, Richard	Levy, Ian	Penning, rh Sir Mike
Cummins, Judith	Grant, Mrs Helen	Lewis, Clive	Penning, rh Sir Mike
Cunningham, Alex	Grant, Peter	Lewis, rh Sir Julian	Pennycook, Matthew
Daby, Janet	Grayling, rh Chris	Lightwood, Simon	Penrose, John
Dalton, Ashley	Greenwood, Lilian	Linden, David (<i>Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson</i>)	Perkins, Mr Toby
Daly, James	Greenwood, Margaret	Loder, Chris	Phillips, Jess
Davey, rh Ed	Grundy, James	Loughton, Tim	Phillipson, Bridget
David, Wayne	Gwynne, Andrew	Lynch, Holly	Philp, rh Chris
Davies, rh David T. C.	Haigh, Louise	Mackrory, Cherylyn	Pollard, Luke
Davies, Gareth	Halfon, rh Robert	Madders, Justin	Poulter, Dr Dan
Davies, Dr James	Hall, Luke	Mahmood, Shabana	Pow, Rebecca
Davies, Mims	Hamilton, Mrs Paulette	Mak, Alan	Powell, Lucy
Davies-Jones, Alex	Hammond, Stephen	Malhotra, Seema	Prentis, rh Victoria
Davis, rh Sir David	Hands, rh Greg	Marson, Julie	Pursglove, Tom
De Cordova, Marsha	Hardy, Emma	Maskell, Rachael	Qaisar, Ms Anum
Debbonaire, Thangam	Harman, rh Ms Harriet	May, rh Mrs Theresa	Quin, rh Sir Jeremy
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Harper, rh Mr Mark	Mayhew, Jerome	Quince, Will
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Harris, Carolyn	McCabe, Steve	Qureshi, Yasmin
Dodds, Anneliese	Harris, Rebecca	McCarthy, Kerry	Rayner, rh Angela
Donelan, rh Michelle	Harrison, Trudy	McCartney, Jason	Rees, Christina
Doogan, Dave	Hart, Sally-Ann	McDonald, Andy	Reynolds, Jonathan
Dorans, Allan (<i>Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson</i>)	Hart, rh Simon	McDonald, Stuart C.	Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Double, Steve	Hayes, Helen	McDonnell, rh John	Richards, Nicola
Doughty, Stephen	Heald, rh Sir Oliver	McFadden, rh Mr Pat	Richardson, Angela
Dowden, rh Oliver	Healey, rh John	McGovern, Alison	Rimmer, Ms Marie
Drummond, Mrs Flick	Heaton-Harris, rh Chris	McKinnell, Catherine	Robinson, Mary
Duffield, Rosie	Hendrick, Sir Mark	McLaughlin, Anne (<i>Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson</i>)	Rodda, Matt
Dunne, rh Philip	Hendry, Drew	McMahon, Jim	Russell, Dean
Eagle, Dame Angela	Hinds, rh Damian	McMorrin, Anna	Rutley, David
Eagle, rh Maria	Hoare, Simon	McPartland, rh Stephen	Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Edwards, Jonathan	Hodge, rh Dame Margaret	Menzies, Mark	Shah, Naz
Edwards, Ruth	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Mercer, rh Johnny	Shanks, Michael
Edwards, Sarah	Holden, rh Mr Richard	Metcalfe, Stephen	Shapps, rh Grant
Efford, Clive	Hollinrake, Kevin	Miliband, rh Edward	Sharma, Mr Virendra
Egan, Damien	Hollobone, Mr Philip	Millar, Robin	Sheerman, Mr Barry
Elliott, Julie	Hopkins, Rachel	Miller, rh Dame Maria	Siddiq, Tulip
Ellis, rh Sir Michael	Howell, John (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Mills, Nigel	Simmonds, David
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias	Howell, Paul	Mishra, Navendu	Slaughter, Andy
Elmore, Chris	Huddleston, Nigel	Mohindra, Mr Gagan	Smith, Alyn
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie	Hudson, Dr Neil	Monaghan, Carol	Smith, Cat
Eshalomi, Florence	Hunt, Jane	Moore, Robbie	Smith, Henry
Esterson, Bill	Huq, Dr Rupa	Morden, Jessica	Smith, Jeff
Evans, Chris	Hussain, Imran	Morgan, Stephen	Smith, rh Julian
Evans, Dr Luke	Jardine, Christine	Morris, Grahame	Smith, Nick
Evennett, rh Sir David	Jarvis, Dan	Mortimer, Jill	Smyth, Karin (<i>Proxy vote cast by Gerald Jones</i>)
Farris, Laura	Javid, rh Sir Sajid	Mundell, rh David	Sobel, Alex
Farry, Stephen	Jenkinson, Mark	Murray, Ian	Spellar, rh John
Fell, Simon	Johnson, Dr Caroline	Murray, James	Spencer, Dr Ben
Fellows, Marion	Johnson, rh Dame Diana	Murray, Mrs Sheryll	Stephens, Chris
Firth, Anna	Johnson, Kim	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew	Stephenson, rh Andrew
Fletcher, Colleen	Jones, Andrew	Neill, Sir Robert	Stevens, Jo
Flynn, rh Stephen	Jones, Darren	Newlands, Gavin	Stevenson, John
Foord, Richard	Jones, Fay	Nichols, Charlotte	Strathern, Alistair
Ford, rh Vicky	Jones, Gerald	Nici, Lia	Streeter, Sir Gary
Fovargue, Yvonne	Jones, rh Mr Kevan	Nicolson, John (<i>Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson</i>)	Streeting, Wes
Foxcroft, Vicky	Jones, rh Mr Marcus	Nokes, rh Caroline	Stride, rh Mel
Freer, Mike	Kane, Mike	Norman, rh Jesse	Sunak, rh Rishi
French, Mr Louie	Kearns, Alicia	Norris, Alex	Sunderland, James
Furniss, Gill	Keegan, rh Gillian	O'Brien, Neil	Tami, rh Mark
Garnier, Mark	Keeley, Barbara		Tarry, Sam
	Khan, Afzal		Thewliss, Alison

Thomas, Derek
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, rh Owen
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, rh Michael
 Trickett, Jon (*Proxy vote cast by Ian Lavery*)
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt

Webb, Suzanne
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson*)
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, rh Craig
 Williams, Hywel
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Young, Jacob
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Aaron Bell and
 Mike Wood

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
 Anderson, Lee
 Atherton, Sarah
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, rh Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baker, rh Mr Steve
 Baynes, Simon
 Berry, rh Sir Jake
 Brady, rh Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Bristow, Paul
 Burghart, Alex
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Doyle-Price, Dame Jackie
 Duddridge, Sir James (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Francois*)
 Eastwood, Mark
 Eustice, rh George
 Fletcher, Nick
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Fuller, Richard
 Galloway, George
 Girvan, Paul
 Green, Chris
 Griffith, Andrew
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Henry, Darren
 Holloway, Adam

Holmes, Paul
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Tom
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lockhart, Carla
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mangnall, Anthony
 McCartney, Karl
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Paisley, Ian
 Randall, Tom
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Rowley, Lee
 Sambrook, Gary
 Shannon, Jim
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Smith, Greg
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Watling, Giles
 Wilson, rh Sammy

Tellers for the Noes:
 Gareth Johnson and
 Craig Whittaker

Question accordingly agreed to.
Bill read a Second time.

TOBACCO AND VAPES BILL: PROGRAMME

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Tobacco and Vapes Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 23 May.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
 (*Mr Mohindra.*)

Question agreed to.

TOBACCO AND VAPES BILL: MONEY

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(*Mr Mohindra.*)

Question agreed to.

TOBACCO AND VAPES BILL: WAYS AND MEANS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, it is expedient to authorise the charging of fees under or by virtue of the Act.—(*Mr Mohindra.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Recommendations of the Infected Blood Inquiry

7.11 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): I wish to present a petition on behalf of those infected and affected by the contaminated blood scandal, particularly my constituent, Sean Cavens. Sean was one of the youngest people in the country to be infected with hepatitis as a result of being given contaminated blood products. He has campaigned tirelessly for justice for those who have been impacted, and he continues to raise the tragedy of those who pass away before justice is done. This is for Sean and all the others who have been impacted by this scandal.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Wansbeck,

Declares that people who received infected blood and who have suffered as a consequence have, along with their families, waited far too long for redress.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to implement the recommendations in the Second Interim Report of the Infected Blood Inquiry without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002951]

Solar Supply Chains

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Aaron Bell.*)

7.13 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy, for granting this important debate.

The solar industry will play an important role in the Government's net zero plans, with a target of producing 70 GW of solar energy by 2035—a fivefold increase on our current output. It is absolutely right that solar plays its part in increasing our renewable energy output, but the current roll-out lacks national oversight of land use, sufficient consideration of food security issues and the protection of agricultural land, and protections against the widespread exposure of solar supply chains to Uyghur forced labour and genocide.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Alicia Kearns: It is early in my speech, but absolutely, I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Brendan O'Hara: I accept that it is early in the hon. Lady's speech, and I thank her for giving way and introducing the debate.

In 2022, I introduced a Bill in Parliament to prohibit the importation of products made by forced labour from Xinjiang. No one in the UK would want to believe that the things that they bought were the product of slave labour. The Bill would have put the onus on manufacturers to prove that they had not been made by slave labour. Does she agree that it would be an important step forward if the Government adopted such a policy?

Alicia Kearns: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman—he is absolutely right. I tabled a very similar amendment to the Energy Bill last year, which I will touch on later.

In 2021, Sheffield Hallam University published a report, “In Broad Daylight: Uyghur Forced Labour and Global Solar Supply Chains”. It summarised the situation as follows:

“Many indigenous workers are unable to refuse or walk away from these jobs, and thus the programmes are tantamount to forcible transfer of populations and enslavement.”

The university's second report, “Over-Exposed”, went further, creating a ranking system for solar companies based on exposure to Uyghur slave labour, which I will come to later in more detail. The two reports were funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, yet their findings do not appear to have been enacted.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing forward the debate. We spoke earlier today. She always leads from the front and I congratulate her on doing that on this important issue, which hon. Members may not know much about. Does she agree that any hint of forced labour means this supply chain should not ever have Government backing and funding? We must hold ourselves to the highest standard on matters of forced labour in every supply chain that may be centrally funded.

Alicia Kearns: It is no surprise that the hon. Gentleman wishes to speak in this debate because he always brings compassion, heart and a real care for human rights. He is right that if green energy is to make up such a substantial part of our future energy grid, we must not tolerate slave labour within it.

As I mentioned in response to my lovely Scots nationalist friend, the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), I tabled an amendment to try to ensure that any solar company wishing to build in this country had to make clear its supply chain was free of Uyghur forced labour. The Government were not willing to support the amendment, but I was assured they would work with me on the issue. I wish to take the opportunity to thank the many Members of the House who backed that effort. The Foreign Affairs Committee has undertaken its own inquiry into exposure to Uyghur slave labour, as a follow up to its inquiry into the genocide in Xinjiang. I have raised the matter in countless other meetings and debates, yet we still see no action as dirty solar continues to flood the market and concrete over our fields and rooftops, unchecked and unaccountable.

That is why last month 43 Members of this House and 32 human rights organisations sent a joint statement to the Government requesting three simple policies that could be enacted to insulate the UK solar market from Uyghur forced labour. The first was to introduce import controls on high-risk industries to insulate our market. It is not unreasonable or too onerous to expect solar developers and manufacturers to demonstrate that their supply chains are clean of slave labour before not only operating but profiting in the UK. The second request was targeted sanctions to ban the worst-offending companies so they cannot operate in the UK, and the third was complementary measures to diversify solar supply chains away from Xinjiang and Uyghur forced labour. By adopting these policies, the Government could clean up the UK's solar industry and ensure our green transition does not come off the back of slavery and genocide.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on bringing this important subject before the House. The United States and the European Union are passing laws to ban solar products made by Uyghur slave labour in Xinjiang, which will leave the UK with an abundance of morally compromised solar panels. Does she agree that the fight against forced labour should be a collective responsibility? If so, does she agree that means the UK Government must work for a clean energy transition, without being complicit in Uyghur forced labour?

Alicia Kearns: The hon. Gentleman is correct. The UK is risking becoming a global outlier, because our international partners have taken action. As he says, the USA passed the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act in 2021. The EU is in the process of passing legislation to block the import of goods made with forced labour. That means that we are becoming a dumping ground for these solar panels.

Since June 2022, the US has seized thousands of shipments of solar materials with links to Xinjiang, but we are yet to seize or block a single import. The US's import controls are working, with the second Sheffield Hallam report showing that many companies have started

creating new supply chains for exports to the US that are clean. Without our own import controls, the UK will continue to welcome dirty solar.

The Sheffield Hallam report also offers an assessment of the exposure of the largest solar companies to forced labour. While the Chinese Communist party seeks to cover up the genocide it is committing in Xinjiang by banning independent audits and investigations, and hiring public relations firms that are issuing lies on a daily basis, the researchers were able to use open-source research to rank the culpability of companies on a scale from "none" to "very high".

Let us have a look at some of those companies. JA Solar has very high exposure to Uyghur forced labour, yet has continually ranked as the biggest supplier of solar modules to the UK; Jinko Solar has very high exposure, and its panels are widely available to buy in the UK; Longi Solar has very high exposure, and its panels are widely available to buy; Qcells has very high exposure, and its panels are widely available to buy; REC Group TwinPeak 4 has very high exposure, and, again, its panels are widely available to buy; Tongwei Solar has high exposure and is partnered with the UK company Polysolar to distribute its panels nationally; Trina Solar has very high exposure and a UK office in Derby; and, finally, that brings me on to Canadian Solar, which is behind the proposed 2,000-acre Mallard Pass solar plant in Rutland and Lincolnshire.

I wish to put this very clearly on the record: anyone who wishes to look at my history in this place will know that I have raised issues around the genocide against the Uyghurs since 2016, long before I came to this House, and specifically around slave labour in supply chains, long before this proposal came to my constituency. Unfortunately, I am now in a situation where Rutland faces having Uyghur blood labour on our beautiful green land, and I will not accept it.

Canadian Solar's application to build Mallard Pass, which would classify as a nationally significant infrastructure project due to its enormous size of 2,100 acres, is currently with the Secretary of State, who will decide whether to grant planning permission. I have lost track of the number of times that I have raised the issue of Canadian Solar—whether it be at the Foreign Affairs Committee, in this place or in Westminster Hall.

People say that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results, but I would argue that, in this case, insanity would be allowing a company so linked to the oppression and genocide of the Uyghur people to build key energy infrastructure in our country. The name Canadian Solar is an attempt at what I call "maple-washing" to distract from the true origins and operations of the company. As of December 2022, 86% of its annual solar module manufacturing capacity was in China; 78% of its solar cell manufacturing capacity was in China; 100% of its annual wafer and ingot manufacturing capacity was in China; and 85% of its employees were based in China. Canadian Solar also had letters of credit worth \$150 million and short-term notes worth \$1.4 billion with Chinese banks.

Although Canadian Solar's operations in China are not in themselves a concern, they offer some context as to why the company's supply chains are so intimately linked with human rights abuses in Xinjiang. In 2021, four shipments of solar panels from Canadian Solar

were seized by the US Government. Why? Because of their links with slave labour from the Uyghur Xinjiang regions. Canadian Solar previously operated a solar plant in the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps' third division city of Tumxuk. The XPCC is a Chinese Communist party-controlled paramilitary organisation in Xinjiang heavily implicated in the Uyghur genocide. In fact, four of its senior officials were sanctioned by the UK in 2021. According to the Sheffield Hallam report, Canadian Solar likely benefits from this relationship with the XPCC. It also has a joint venture with GCL-Poly, one of the largest suppliers of polysilicon. GCL-Poly was, yet again, sanctioned by the US. Why? It was for "participating in the practice of, accepting, or utilising forced labour in Xinjiang and contributing to human rights abuses against Uyghurs and other minority groups in Xinjiang."

After I launched my campaign to expose Canadian Solar, it removed all references to its partnership with GCL-Poly from its website, but, of course, archived forms and press reports mean that we still have the evidence of it.

As of December 2021, Canadian Solar's primary suppliers were Longi Green Energy, Hongyuan New Material and Tongwei Solar—all companies with subsidiaries operating in Xinjiang with links to Uyghur forced labour. I have provided full written briefs on each company's links to forced labour to the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero in the past.

In June 2022, Canadian Solar's own shareholders attempted to deselect several board members. Why? It was because of their inaction over forced labour in the company's supply chains. In December 2022, the US Commerce Department found Canadian Solar guilty of tariff dodging. This means that it took its solar panels from China to Thailand, tried to disguise them and then shipped them to the US, but it was caught out.

Sadly, the attitude of the company is best discerned by a leaked email from chief financial officer Chang, who faulted human rights organisations for their work when he said that they

"mistakenly regard any employment of Uyghurs as forced labour, which has caused severe harm to the Uyghurs we all love."

There you have it, Madam Deputy Speaker. According to Canadian Solar's senior management, the responsibility for the genocide and the use of slave labour lies not with the Chinese Communist party and the companies which use its labour for profit, but with the brave non-governmental organisations and human rights groups that dared to highlight the Uyghurs' plight.

All the evidence is there. I have raised it countless times, so I want to ask this of the Minister directly: will we now change the rules for nationally significant infrastructure projects so that links to forced labour are finally considered? I do not believe there is any other form of procurement in this country, particularly public sector procurement or procurement for the national good, where we do not take forced labour into consideration. Will the Government act against blood labour-made products polluting our shores? If not, why not?

I want to pre-empt—rather cheekily—a point that I think the Minister might raise: the solar stewardship initiative. Anyone who has followed my interventions will know that I have been sceptical of an industry-led solution to this problem. The solar stewardship initiative led by Solar Energy UK was published last September.

Its environmental, social and governance document does not mention Uyghur forced labour a single time, despite that mechanism being set up to prove that there is no slave labour within supply chains. In fact, Solar Energy UK devotes only one short paragraph to forced labour, but does not set out how it will be identified in supply chains or any consequences for approved companies that are found to benefit from it.

If we go back to the list of companies that I read out—I recognise that it was long, Madam Deputy Speaker—both JA Solar and Jinko Solar, which are ranked as having very high exposure to forced labour, are already certified SSI members. Apparently there is no problem with slave labour in their chains, despite the Foreign Office saying that there is. I was very disappointed that Solar Energy UK refused, when I met its chief executive, to remove Canadian Solar from the industry lobby group, despite the overwhelming evidence against it. I fear that we will now see a similar attitude from Solar Energy UK created in conjunction with Solar Europe. It seems illogical to allow an industry so tainted by forced labour to be allowed to create its own certification programme with zero external oversight. Will the Minister please set out what active mechanisms will exist to examine the supply chains of SSI certified members, and what the consequences will be for those found to benefit from Uyghur forced labour in their supply chains? Can he confirm that he is confident that the SSI will clean up the UK solar market of its connections to Uyghur forced labour?

Although I believe that any solar company with links to Uyghur forced labour should be banned from operating on the UK as a matter of principle, it is also worth investigating what Chinese supply chains mean in practice for our environment and going green. The process of mining for and manufacturing solar panels in China relies heavily on coal power. Professor David Rogers, an expert in ecology at the University of Oxford, estimates that because of those coal-dependent supply chains, solar energy produces three units of carbon for every one unit with wind energy. Of other renewable forms of energy, only biomass has a larger carbon footprint than solar. In a study by the World Bank comparing 240 countries, the UK was found to have the second lowest potential for solar photovoltaic potential—only Ireland was less suited to solar energy. That explains why I am so pale—there is not much sunshine in my English-Irish heritage. *[Interruption.]* Maybe I should talk about Scotland next, but I think I will move swiftly on.

Solar installations in the UK generate maximum power for an average of 2.6 hours a day, falling to less than one hour a day in winter. Solar plants produce energy when we least need it—during hot and sunny periods—but contribute next to nothing during peaks in demand in winter, when it is dark and cold. Battery storage is carbon intensive and can extend solar power supplies by only 2 hours a day, and not in between seasons. A 140-acre solar plant can provide enough electricity for roughly 9,000 homes, while just one wind turbine in the North sea can power 16,000 homes.

We are not blessed with abundant sunshine—I am living proof—but we have plenty of wind and the Celtic sea, so why do the Government continue to sacrifice green-belt and agriculturally rich land for inefficient, carbon-intensive solar, made with Uyghur slave labour, when we should invest in wind energy, a technology that

[Alicia Kearns]

the UK leads in? We should be so proud of our record on wind—we have achieved enormous things. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) for securing a Westminster Hall debate on solar plants on Thursday. I hope that the Minister will note how many debates are being held on this issue, and I hope that Members' concerns are considered significant.

Another issue that has increasingly been raised is the need to protect our best and most versatile agricultural land. In responding to a written question that I submitted in February, the Minister confirmed that DESNZ is not currently monitoring what types of land or how much land is being used for solar developments across our country, and has no plans to do so. There are over 400 farms in my constituency, so that is deeply concerning. How is the Department able to answer Members' questions about how much BMV land is being lost if the Government themselves are not recording it? However, I have had a conversation with the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, and he gave me hope that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is recording that information.

The Mallard Pass solar plant alone would see 1,000 acres of grade 1 BMV land lost—not grades 2 or 3 but grade 1—yet that might not even be recorded or noticed by the Government. Although the total amount of UK land used for solar might be small, the type of land being lost is key. Crops and solar like the same thing: flat, sunny landscapes. It is therefore no surprise that over 50% of all solar applications in this country are in Rutland and Lincolnshire. Two counties that are the breadbasket of the UK are now being concreted over with solar panels, so at a time of global food insecurity when 46% of our food is imported, does the Minister agree that food security should be a Government priority, and will he instruct his officials to begin to monitor how much solar is being built, what type, and in what areas? I am relieved that the farming Secretary will bring forward a national land strategy, which is something else I have been campaigning for. I hope that strategy will better protect BMV land.

Finally, I previously met the Government to discuss compensation schemes for solar, so will the Minister please provide an update on when we can expect a new industry standard for solar compensation? The wind energy industry came together, which was absolutely right—it put forward a proposal that is now standard throughout the country—yet in Rutland, for example, we were offered something like £100,000 or £400,000 to compensate us for the next 40 years of losing 2,100 acres of good-quality arable land, with one of our villages, Essendine, 96% surrounded by solar.

The evidence of Uyghur forced labour in the solar industry supply chain is abundant. It is laid out in Foreign Office-funded reports, in the evidence collected by the Foreign Affairs Committee, in sanctions imposed by the US Government and in the documents of the offending companies themselves. Over the past four years, I have done all I can to shine a light on that evidence, and now, with the support of 42 Members of this House and 32 human rights organisations, I have asked for three simple policies to bring the UK in line with our international partners so that we do not become a

dumping ground and can finally clear up the solar industry. The first policy is to introduce import controls; the second is to sanction the worst companies; and the third is to enact complementary measures to diversify. Solar should be part of the final make-up of our energy platform, but it must be on buildings, on brownfield and on grade 4 land. I also ask the Minister to commit to reaching out to his counterparts in the US and EU to discuss their Uyghur forced labour import controls and how we can learn from them.

Our transition to net zero is gathering pace, and we must not let up. I am so proud that we have decarbonised faster than any other major Government—what we have done is an incredible achievement—but we cannot go green off the back of slavery, genocide and blood labour. Our green and pleasant land is being tainted by solar panels produced with that Uyghur blood labour, and it is the responsibility of all of us and the Government to prevent it. I see it as a new form of great injustice that we will be going green off the backs of solar panels made in dirty circumstances in China, because we do not see how they are made—not least how they harm the environment where they are made, but also the slave labour that we then benefit from in our country. There is a really concerning historical parallel there.

We have the information, we have the solution, and now all we need is some action: work with our allies, fall in line with international standards and do what we all know is the right thing. We refuse to allow the Uyghur genocide to continue, yet somehow play a role in it. I know the Minister deeply cares about slave labour—he spoke out frequently on these issues when he was a Back Bencher—and is very aware of the threat from the Chinese Communist party and the way in which it treats Uyghur activists and all those living in Xinjiang. I thank him for the fact that his door is always open to me, and that he always takes the time to discuss these issues with me, but we do need to take action and we need to do so now.

7.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns)—she is a friend—for securing an incredibly important debate. I absolutely recognise her dedication to this serious issue and her eagerness to tackle it, noting her recent joint letter to the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, alongside the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Business and Trade.

Let me be very clear and get right to the issue: UK businesses and solar developers should not countenance receiving solar panels from companies that may be linked to forced labour. This Government have been very clear on our position regarding the abhorrent practice of forced labour, and our expectation that companies will do everything in their power to remove any instances of forced labour from their supply chains.

That is why it was this Conservative Government who introduced new guidance on the risks of doing business in Xinjiang, who enhanced export controls, and who announced the introduction of financial penalties for those who fail to report as required under the Modern Slavery Act 2015. It was this Government who led the charge, announcing in September 2020 a requirement that large businesses and public bodies report on specific

areas within their modern slavery statements, including their due diligence processes in relation to modern slavery. Additionally, it was this Government who recently passed the Procurement Act 2023, enabling public sector contracting authorities to reject bids from suppliers that are known to use forced labour themselves, or anywhere in their supply chain, and terminate contracts with such suppliers.

However, this remains a complex issue, and my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton is absolutely right: we must continue to review how we can best tackle forced labour in supply chains. I can promise her that we have not ruled out taking further and additional measures in the future. Across every part of Government, not just in the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, we are continuing to engage and work with our international partners to understand the impact of measures to combat forced labour around the world.

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has a strong record of holding countries to account for instances of forced labour. The Government have led international efforts to make China accountable for its human rights violations in Xinjiang. We were the first country to lead a joint statement on China's human rights record in Xinjiang at the UN, and our leadership has sustained pressure on China to change its behaviour. In October 2023, the UK led another joint statement on Xinjiang at the UN, and at China's universal periodic review in January the UK urged China to cease the persecution of Uyghurs and allow them genuine freedom of religion or belief and cultural expression without fear of surveillance, torture, forced labour or sexual violence. We have also imposed sanctions and consistently raised China's human rights violations with the Chinese authorities at the highest levels. The Foreign Secretary last did so with China's Foreign Minister in February.

On the solar sector in general and the presence of forced labour in solar supply chains, I should first set out the importance of solar energy as a key part of the Government's strategy for net zero, energy independence and growth. As my hon. Friend said, we are aiming for 70 GW of solar capacity by 2035. The UK has huge potential for solar power, which is a cheap, versatile and effective technology that is a key part of the Government's strategy for net zero, energy independence and clean growth. It is part of our wider energy mix, and she was absolutely right to reference our strong leadership in offshore wind. We have the first to the fifth largest offshore wind farms in the world, and we are investing in new technologies and, indeed, in our new nuclear capacity, so this is part of a wider mix to get to our net zero future.

On solar, I recently co-chaired the final meeting of the solar taskforce, alongside Solar Energy UK, at 10 Downing Street. In fact, in the solar taskforce—and thanks to the pressure from my hon. Friend—we established a specific sub-group to consider the wide-ranging actions needed to develop solar supply chains that are resilient, sustainable, innovative and free from forced labour. This work will inform the Government's solar road map, due to be published in the next few months, which will set out the trajectory and actions needed to deploy up to 70 GW by 2035.

One of the main topics of discussion at the solar taskforce was the solar stewardship initiative, which my hon. Friend mentioned. It is a solar supply chain assurance

scheme developed, piloted, audited and launched by the UK's main trade association, Solar Energy UK, working alongside its European counterpart, SolarPower Europe. In fact, the UK Government co-sponsored the development and publication of Action Sustainability's "Addressing Modern Slavery and Labour Exploitation in Solar PV Supply Chains Procurement Guidance", to provide further tools to industry to ensure the responsible sourcing of solar panels.

I have been largely pleased to see the response from the industry following our work on this issue, and I am delighted to highlight that, on 28 March, 55 companies and organisations across the solar sector signed a supply chain statement highlighting their commitment to ensuring that the solar sector is free from any human rights abuses, including forced labour, anywhere in the global supply chain. Resilient, sustainable and innovative supply chains are essential to support the significant increases in solar deployment needed to deliver the UK's ambition for 70 GW of solar capacity by 2035.

Alicia Kearns: I met the chief executive of Solar Energy UK and asked him, "What happens if one of the companies that signs up to your solar stewardship scheme isn't keeping itself free of slave labour? What will you do?" He did not have an answer for me, and I said, "Well, will you kick them out? Will you exclude them?" He said, "We don't have a mechanism to do that." So have things changed in that there is now a mechanism to exclude? How are we making sure that it is actually being audited? The chief executive said that Solar Energy UK is taking a company's word for it, when one signs up, that it is free from slave labour. Companies are not having to provide any evidence that they are free of slave labour when they sign up for the initiative.

Andrew Bowie: On my hon. Friend's latter point, there will be more detail on exactly how the auditing process will proceed when we publish the solar road map in the next few months. On her former point, I must be absolutely clear from this Dispatch Box that if a company is engaging in buying pieces of equipment that they knowingly know have been developed using slave labour in Xinjiang, or indeed anywhere else in the world, they should be held to account and they absolutely should not be allowed to remain a part of the initiative. That is absolutely the view of the Department, this Government and, indeed, the wider industry.

The Government already encourage developers to grow sustainable supply chains through the supply chain plan process included in the contract for difference scheme for projects over 300 MW.

Jim Shannon: The Minister referred to 55 companies, and I presume they include companies from Northern Ireland. It is important that we have a policy that affects all of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland so they are all accountable.

Andrew Bowie: I assure the hon. Gentleman that what we are speaking about and the industry initiatives that I am laying out cover every part of our United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and if any companies are involved in Northern Ireland, they will of course be covered by the schemes and initiatives and,

[Andrew Bowie]

indeed, by the legislation we have passed to ensure that we get to the root cause and remove slave labour from the supply chain.

The UK has the scope to grow industries that produce innovative solar technology while also crystallising our position as world leaders in cutting-edge solar research and development. In doing so we can create new green jobs and provide levelling-up and significant export opportunities while building up UK capability and resilience and increasing energy security by reducing our reliance on imports. Meanwhile, we support our allies' efforts to increase and accelerate the diversification of solar supply chains by reshoring manufacturing. We continue to work with countries including the US, Canada and Germany to ensure that access to solar supply chains remains resilient.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton referred to the situation of solar on agricultural land. The Government recognise that in some instances solar

projects can affect the local environment. It is important that the Government can strike the right balance between such considerations and securing a clean, green energy system for the future. That is why the planning system is designed to take account of such issues. However, I am aware of the number of issues arising from deployments and planned applications, and I am engaging on the issue with many colleagues and their communities, discussing with them what we can do to ensure that community concerns are listened to.

I again thank my hon. Friend for bringing forward this important issue, and look forward to continuing to engage with her on it.

Question put and agreed to.

7.42 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 16 April 2024

[VALERIE VAZ *in the Chair*]

Food Waste and Food Distribution

9.30 am

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered food waste and food distribution.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. Let me begin by reflecting on our connection to food. We all have cherished memories of key moments in our lives, sharing food with family, friends and neighbours at birthdays, weddings and celebration dinners. Food is the thread that weaves together the fabric of our families, communities and society. It is a universal language spoken and understood by all, regardless of background and belief. It is a remedy for loneliness. In a world in which technology disconnects us, food has the power to bring us together. For thousands of years, in the oldest cities on our planet, people have lived their lives in courtyards, in squares, on street corners and in cafés, tea houses and local shops, and they have shopped, shared gossip and shared food.

Knowing how we value food, it is an outrage that 4.6 million tonnes of edible food goes to waste every year, which is enough to feed everyone in the country for almost two months. That is just edible food waste, including food waste at the farm gate. We throw away more than 11 million tonnes of food each year, which is valued at £20.8 billion. The overall land use associated with food wasted on UK farms alone amounts to almost the size of Wales.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The hon. Lady is setting out the parameters of the debate well. On the farm gate issue, a lot of the waste is driven by consumer choice and by products on the shelf not looking acceptable to supermarkets or people. Does she agree that we need to look at more innovative approaches, such as that of Growers Garden in Cupar in my constituency, which takes the 20% of wonky vegetables and makes them into crisps? It is also a much healthier option than potato crisps.

Jo Gideon: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I will come on to wonky veg, which is a particular passion of mine.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing the debate. Does she agree that some of the larger supermarkets are doing something to reduce the extent of food waste, but much more could be done to target hard-to-reach communities and food banks, where much more of the edible food waste could be put to much better use?

Jo Gideon: I absolutely agree. I will come on to that point, too.

By eliminating avoidable food waste, the average four-person household could save about £1,000 each year. Worldwide, about a third of all food produced is lost or wasted. That contributes to between 8% and 10% of total global greenhouse gas emissions. If food waste were a country, it would be the world's third largest emitter of greenhouse gases, behind the US and China, accounting for more than four times the amount of carbon dioxide emissions produced by the world's aviation industry.

Food waste is a social, financial and environmental issue. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is working closely with WRAP—the waste and resources action programme—and industry to meet the Government's Courtauld commitment to reduce food waste by 50% by 2030. Policy interventions are essential. We have reached the point at which the early adopters have taken up the cause, and measures are required to encourage action from the late majority. At the supply end of the food chain, retailers and manufacturer practices can have a significant impact on household waste.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Will she join me in thanking volunteers, such as the wonderful Bethan Davies, who work with Tesco in Holyhead and other local supermarkets to pick up surplus food, and the community champions Roy Fyles, David Coulson and others at the Anglesey food bank, who ensure that surplus food is not wasted but redistributed across Ynys Môn to those in need?

Jo Gideon: Yes, I congratulate the people my hon. Friend has identified. There are people and organisations in all our constituencies doing fabulous work in this space, and I would like to give a shout-out to them all.

Let me go back to retailers and things that could be helpful, such as changes to packaging, date labelling and multi-buy offers. The biggest reason for household waste in 2022 was that food was not used on time as it was past the date on the label, so we must improve our date labelling and remove unnecessary use-by stickers on fresh produce. Selling more fruit and veg uncut and free from packaging also prolongs shelf life and enables customers to buy only what they need, with the additional benefit of reducing packaging waste.

Guardians of Grub is WRAP's food waste reduction campaign to tackle the £3 billion of food that is thrown away at hospitality and food service outlets. It explains that, on average, 18% of the food purchased by the UK hospitality and food service sector is being thrown away. Indeed, I am often concerned about the levels of food waste at catered events here in the House.

Quantifying the cost of food waste on the environment is particularly challenging, as the economic cost of climate change is highly contested, but it is clear that when it is left to decompose in landfill, food waste releases methane—a potent greenhouse gas that drives climate change—into the atmosphere. Greenhouse gas emissions could be reduced by an estimated 1.25 million tonnes per year if all local authorities collected household food waste separately to send to an anaerobic digester. Despite that, more than half of councils do not collect food waste.

[Jo Gideon]

I am therefore grateful that the Government have committed to proposals that councils must arrange a weekly collection of food waste. Introducing a separate collection redirects food waste away from landfill and towards recycling and reduction. It was announced in the net zero strategy that £295 million of capital funding was being brought forward to allow local authorities to prepare to implement the new weekly separate food waste collection from all households. Will the Minister clarify how councils will be expected to finance that new waste stream?

Food waste occurs throughout the food supply chain. Although it is a significant problem at the post-retail end of the chain, a large degree of wastage is documented at the start of the chain, at the farm gate. A single-year study by WRAP revealed that for just two important crops, strawberries and lettuces, £30 million-worth of food ended up as waste: 9% of strawberry production and 19% of lettuces grown. We have also heard about the problem of excessive rain this year, which means that crops will struggle.

As much as 48% of all food loss occurs pre-harvest, with food left in fields, driven by decisions on standards and specifications beyond the control of farmers, such as for the wonky veg that we heard about earlier, and an inflexible broken food system that I am determined we should do more to tackle. We need to fill the gap in food waste policy by focusing on on-farm food waste. Farmers currently lack incentives to redistribute the food, so instead it is left to rot, sent to landfill or anaerobic digestion. This is very topical: climate challenges mean that farmers have recently had to make difficult decisions.

The Government's subsidy regime gives out £750 million to the anaerobic digestion industry each year, but 64,500 tonnes of the food processed by anaerobic digestion is perfectly good surplus food. Many categorise food waste as a hierarchy. We should aim to keep as much food as possible at the top of that hierarchy. Preferably, it should be distributed to humans, preventing it from becoming waste. Redistribution is the next best option, followed by being sent to animal feed. Recycling food through anaerobic digestion or compost should happen only when the food is unsuitable for consumption.

A recent survey by *Farmers Weekly* shows that if costs were not a factor, the majority of farmers would like to see surplus food redistributed to charities.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): Does the hon. Lady agree that supermarkets leave food to the very last minute rather than distributing it for human consumption, because they are incentivised to divert it to animal feed? If we can turn that around and incentivise them, as happens in France, to divert it to human consumption or make it compulsory, we will be in a far better place. It would solve some of the problems to which she alludes.

Jo Gideon: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. That is exactly the problem that we need to address.

At its heart, this is a simple logistics problem. How can we ensure that as much food as possible reaches the table? When food that is fit to eat cannot be sold, how can we get it to the people who most need it? Has the Minister looked at using the environmental land

management schemes to rebalance the incentive for farmers to redistribute their edible food waste where it will be eaten rather than sent for anaerobic digestion?

Specifications can be beneficial and problematic. UK growers are proud of the high-quality food that they produce, but stringent quality parameters have embedded a buying culture among consumers who expect cosmetically perfect-looking produce. Many retailers have launched wonky veg lines to tackle food waste issues. However, those are not as popular, because consumers are trained to think that if something does not look perfect it is in some way inferior, so there is higher in-store wastage on the wonky lines.

Growers do not aim to grow wonky veg. Commercially, it costs the same, but it does not yield the same financial returns as their core volume crops. Retailers need to adopt greater flexibility and specifications to utilise the whole crop, and as consumers we must welcome produce in all shapes and sizes.

In 2022, the Government consulted on plans to require larger food businesses to report their levels of food waste, which resulted in the adoption of a voluntary approach. Following feedback from stakeholders, that decision is being revisited. I welcome that, and I support a regulatory approach to food waste reporting for large food businesses. Will the Minister update us on progress and advise us when we can expect the Government's decision? The longer it takes, the more food will be wasted. Wasted food is also a waste of the land used to grow it, which could be better used to achieve other societal objectives such as nature recovery.

The first step for food chain operators towards meaningful food waste reduction action is to measure current levels of food waste and publicly report them so that they can act to eliminate waste. What is not measured cannot be reduced, so that is a vital first step. Evidence shows that 99% of companies that invested in food waste reduction had a positive return on their investment, and that for half the companies a £1 investment in action to reduce food waste yields a £14 return. Large businesses would have to prevent only 0.25% of the food waste that they create each year to offset any costs of measurement. That shows that reporting can support wider measures from the Government to reduce inflation and the cost of living.

Any enhanced voluntary or mandatory reporting regime should emphasise that products that are good to eat do not end up as waste. The Company Shop Group, for example, redistributes food that is good to eat or use and is within date, but has been deemed surplus for minor issues such as labelling or packaging errors.

I could not speak on this topic without raising the excellent work of FareShare, the UK's largest food redistribution charity, which takes edible surplus food from more than 500 businesses and redistributes it to people in need through a UK-wide network of almost 11,000 frontline charities. One in four of the charities with which FareShare works say that if it were not for that supply, they could not keep up with demand to support the people who use their services.

It is often local groups that do fantastic work in this space, so I am delighted, as always, to highlight local efforts to combat food waste. Our local food banks and community-based kitchens, which are often based in faith settings, support those who are most in need. I am

always humbled, when visiting volunteer-run local organisations—sadly, there are too many to name individually—to witness how those who have little help those who have less. I recognise and hugely value the work that the charities do in the food redistribution space. We now need to widen the discussion to cover the whole redistribution sector and include opportunities for social enterprises and commercial redistributors. Those businesses have a huge impact on tackling food insecurity in local communities and have a company mission of reducing food waste.

Technology will play an ever-growing role in combating surplus food from local businesses going to waste. In my constituency, we have saved more than 56,000 meals from the bin by using the Too Good To Go app, which is equivalent to one and a half years' worth of hot showers or 24.8 million smartphone charges. I ask the Minister to consider how that might tie in with introducing more flexibility to the apprenticeship levy, helping to fill skills gaps in the food redistribution sector and the wider food chain and creating more employment opportunities in this growing sector. Indeed, there are excellent business and social enterprise models out there, funded by surplus food in an entirely self-sustaining way, with a social mission to address pathways out of food insecurity, while also preventing food from being wasted.

The national food strategy independent review highlighted the need to rethink our approach to food production, consumption and distribution. Vast potential remains for surplus distribution. By raising awareness of the need to tackle food waste and creating a policy space that empowers businesses, we encourage innovative and supportive investment. As we celebrate the joys and connections that food fosters, let us also pledge to combat food waste and extend the spirit of sharing surplus with those in need in every community.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. I aim to call the SNP spokesperson to wind up at about 10.28 am, so if hon. Members stick to four to five minutes, everyone will get in.

9.47 am

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): Thank you, Ms Vaz. I was thinking, “Please don’t call me, because my speech is eight minutes,” but there we go—you have not given me time to cut it down! I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) for bringing this debate to Westminster Hall today. It is really important; we always say that, but this is crucial.

For most people, the past two years have been utterly dominated by the cost of living crisis, a fall in their living standards and a struggle from one payday to the next. The idea that there would be food waste as people struggle to feed their families seems perverse, but here we are.

I declare an interest, other than the obvious interest of my constituents’ right to nutritious food: I am proud to be a trustee of the Scottish Pantry Network, which started with one pantry in my constituency a few years ago and now has 23 member pantries across Scotland. I will say more about that later, but our passion is alleviating food poverty and reducing food waste. We do that day to day in each of the pantries, and we

campaign more broadly for changes that, if we get our way, will make our pantries unnecessary. I am sorry to say that that is not the only organisation in my constituency to have to feed my constituents. North Glasgow Community Food Initiative, Lambhill Stables, Blackhill’s Growing and Spirit of Springburn are just a few of the many, and I pay tribute to their incredible work.

Of course, the UK is not alone in dealing with rampant inflation and an increasing number of its citizens not only feeling the pinch, but being thrust into severe poverty. It is not alone in having far too much wastage in a supply chain predicated on food being plentiful and cheap. Where it differs from other G7 nations such as France and the US is that it has not legislated to address that. The bulk of the work is being carried out by charities and community groups, so it is essential that there is a legislative and economic framework in place to support the businesses and supermarkets that already contribute, as we have heard, and to force those that are not yet engaging to do so. I guess that is probably where we will disagree; I think that they should be forced into it.

As has been mentioned, FareShare is one of the charities at the coalface. To cut down on time, I will not say the wonderful things that I was going to say about it, because the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central has already done that.

My organisation, the Scottish Pantry Network, believes that dignity for people accessing our services is essential. We do not give away food and we do not require people to be living in poverty to access it. We also ensure that the food we sell includes fresh fruit, vegetables, meat and fish. It works out as roughly £15-worth of food for £3 or £4, and we sell it because it gives people some agency; it makes them customers and it means that they are not asking for a handout.

When a person enters one of our pantries, nobody knows whether their motivation is saving the environment or alleviating their own poverty. Many of our shops look exactly like any other shop on the high street. In fact, the Courtyard Pantry in Hamiltonhill in my constituency would not look out of place in a trendy west end setting—although I am not sure how they will feel about me saying that.

Diverting good food from landfill on to people’s plates makes sense on so many different levels. Surely to goodness we can agree that we must do everything in our power, here in this room, to support that. There are a few immediate steps that any Government, incoming or outgoing, need to take to address food insecurity and waste. As I said, the important one is to incentivise surplus food redistribution across the supply chain.

Under current legislation, supermarkets are incentivised to pass food on to become animal feed, even when it is still fit for human consumption. They know that they can still sell the food, so they hang on as long as possible. By the time they give up and decide to get rid of it, it is no longer usable, or it has around three hours left before it becomes unsafe for human consumption. But that is all right because, at that point, the supermarkets are given a subsidy for the food to be given for animal feed. I would like to see that changed.

In France, that practice has been outlawed; supermarkets are simply not allowed to throw away edible food. Incentivising giving food for human consumption is

[Anne McLaughlin]

feasible and workable. I am interested to hear what the Minister has to say about it, as well as the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner)—just in case.

FareShare supplies most of the food to our pantries, but it often struggles to keep up with demand. Right now, FareShare accesses around 4% of the surplus food in the UK. Other businesses, such as discount stores, also buy up the surplus food. If FareShare could access its fair share, organisations such as mine could feed more people.

I want the Minister to know that those organisations are not sitting back and saying, “Give us more.” As we have heard, they are using innovative ways to get more for the people they support. They are growing food—my organisation now has a partnership with a farm, yet we are city-based. They are teaching people to cook so that nothing goes to waste. My organisation has wraparound services to support people into better paid employment and healthier lifestyles. When I ask for Government support for these organisations to be able to access more food, it is to add to the many ways they are doing that themselves. That is worthy of not just kind words—which I am sure will be forthcoming—but action.

We are debating food insecurity, and the focus has so far been primarily on the UK. Members can see that I am passionate about that, but I cannot speak about malnourishment and hungry people without mentioning Palestine, where thousands are starving and at least 27 children have recently died from malnutrition. There is food to feed them, but to get the food there we need a ceasefire now. I repeat my solidarity with the people of Palestine and my disgust at the perpetrators, and I reiterate the calls from so many of us for an immediate and unequivocal ceasefire.

9.53 am

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) on securing today’s important debate. As she mentioned, 4.6 million tonnes of edible food are wasted in UK households annually. Around a quarter of that food waste is because too much food has been prepared, cooked or served.

I have been a big supporter of FareShare and its work, which in 2023 delivered 33,500 meals through six local community groups back home in North Devon, and more than 132 million meals nationwide. FareShare is the UK’s largest food redistribution charity. It takes surplus food from the food industry that would otherwise go to waste and gets it to a network of 8,500 charities across the UK. However, budget constraints meant that FareShare had to turn down up to 2 million meals-worth of good-to-eat surplus food last year.

I wrote to the Chancellor last November to support the food redistribution sector, because I felt that it was important that the Government continue to support FareShare’s invaluable work for our communities, and that they reconsider the ringfencing of funding for the sector. I am glad that after FareShare’s continuous campaigning, the Government have recently announced a new £15 million fund to tackle surplus food at farm

level. The fund will enable farmers to redistribute surplus food that cannot be used commercially. As a very rural MP, I occasionally see different surplus food products in my constituency. I met FareShare very early on in my time in this place, and I was particularly interested to discuss its work with the Country Food Trust, which has championed dishes such as pheasant curry and venison bolognese as high-protein meat sources.

I also want to highlight the Government’s work to combat food waste. They have invested £2.6 million and have supported the Courtauld commitment 2030, which works for a more sustainable supply chain to tackle food waste and reduce greenhouse gas emissions and water use. Commitments also include a target to halve food waste by 2030.

In 2022, the Government consulted on options to improve food waste reporting by large food businesses in England. More than 380,000 responses were received, and hopefully DEFRA will be considering whether mandatory food waste reporting should be introduced in the future. Nearly £13 million has been awarded to over 250 redistribution organisations across the country since 2018 for the provision of warehousing, vehicles, fridges and freezers.

Weekly collections of food waste will be introduced for most households across England by 2026, ending the threat of waste waiting weeks for collection and cutting food waste heading to landfill. I find it bewildering that when I am up in London I have to put my food waste in the bin with everything else, unlike when I back home in North Devon, where we have a separate food caddy collection, so many thanks to North Devon Council for its work in ensuring that the weekly collections continue. I hope that we will be able to stop the move towards the three and four-weekly bin collections that have been seen in some areas of the UK, because we do not want food waste, particularly in a hot summer, to be sat on the doorstep for too long.

When I supported FareShare’s #FoodOnPlates campaign back in 2021, I said that wasting good food should never be cheaper than feeding people. I ask the Minister to look again at some of FareShare’s requests on how to incentivise businesses to redistribute more surplus food and consider long-term plans, such as the national food strategy, to recognise the bigger picture of how our food system is also linked to our environmental goals.

Many residents at home in North Devon have raised concerns with me about the rise in food prices, which impacts us all. As a result, many charities have reported financial difficulties. As the redistribution of food falls within a cross-departmental remit, I hope that the Minister will be able to share some insight into what is being done behind the scenes to support this crucial sector. Let me take this opportunity to put on the record my thanks to everyone back home in North Devon for their ongoing work on food distribution and to reduce our food waste.

9.57 am

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) for securing this important debate.

Food redistribution services are fighting on the frontline of the food waste and climate crisis and must be supported. More than a third of all food in the UK is wasted, which is an absolutely shocking statistic. That waste contributes up to 10% of all greenhouse gas emissions and costs the UK economy over £20 billion a year, which is more than the entire aviation sector. There is always lots of public debate about the environmental impacts of aviation, but maybe it is time to shed more light on how we can support food redistribution schemes, which will be foundational if we are to have a more environmentally sustainable future.

In my constituency, I have a wonderful example of success in the redistribution sector called Company Shop, which we have heard about already. The Company Shop Group is a food redistribution service that has been able to transform unwanted products into usable, saleable goods for the benefit of my community and many others in various locations across the country. It understands that the UK throws away at least 10 million tonnes of food every year, but, incredibly, 6 million tonnes of that waste is avoidable and has a retail value of over £17 billion. That is where the Company Shop Group can prevent wasted food and salvage value that would otherwise have literally gone in the bin by reselling the surplus food at a discounted price to its members.

The store in my constituency has saved my constituents nearly £7.5 million on their shopping bills, while saving 2,649 tonnes of food from being binned. Those numbers are astonishing and represent 6.3 million meals that would otherwise have gone to landfill, where they would have fed no one and contributed to preventable environmental damage.

Benefits from food redistribution services such as this are felt by more than just our planet; they are felt in our constituents' pockets too. As we have seen over the last few years, the cost of food can rise very quickly and fall very slowly, and contribute to growing levels of food insecurity and financial hardship for working people. Food redistribution schemes can be incredibly useful in preventing food waste and ensuring that our food system is more affordable and sustainable. Although the sector has seen incredible success from various charities, there is also vital work by social enterprises and commercial organisations such as the Company Shop Group that we can celebrate.

As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on school food, I hear from food procurement specialists, school food providers, schools and families alike of the dire consequences of food insecurity. It is one of the major challenges policymakers currently face, and the most vulnerable in our society are those who suffer the most. We need to support charities, businesses and organisations to put food redistribution at the centre of their operations, so that we can save our constituents money and preserve the planet for future generations.

That is why many of us cautiously welcome DEFRA's recent announcement that it will reconsider its earlier decision to delay mandatory food waste reporting for large food businesses until 2026. Due to overwhelming support for the policy from environmentalists, food and nutrition campaigners, food redistribution specialists, the public and businesses alike, the appetite for mandatory food waste reporting is at an all-time high. It is a relatively light-touch and simple intervention, which could be hugely cost-effective, incentivising large food

businesses to cut down on their waste, and incentivising redistribution by organisations such as the Company Shop Group.

The food redistribution system has the potential to be incredibly efficient, as long as we achieve the joined-up policymaking that stakeholders across the sector are calling for. Last month, over 30 companies within the food, retail and manufacturing sectors signed an open letter organised by the food redistribution app Too Good to Go. If anybody has not used that app yet, I can highly recommend it, especially in London, where you can access anything within a few metres of where you are; that is not so much the case in the north-east, although I do still manage to use it there.

The letter called on the Government to introduce mandatory food waste reporting as soon as possible. By reporting on food wastage, we support redistribution schemes and tackle the crisis of food waste that was, for too long, a hidden evil in our food system. We need to put food redistribution at the centre of how we think about our food system, and we need the policies to make this happen. Repealing DEFRA's 2026 timeline and introducing mandatory food waste reporting as soon as possible should be a good place to start. I look forward to the Minister's response.

10.3 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) for leading today's debate. It is estimated that total food waste in the UK amounted to 10.7 million tonnes in 2021. Most food waste comes from households, equating to some 60%, followed by farms, at 15%, manufacturing, at 13%, and retail, at 2%. It is clear that we need to do more as a collective to tackle our food waste statistics, so it is good to be here to discuss the issue. It is not just something that the Minister gives us the solutions for; it is something that we, as elected representatives, and communities must work together on.

I was shocked to read that the edible parts of household waste amounted to £17 billion. That is the equivalent of £250 per person per year, or £1,000 for a family of four. In Northern Ireland in 2021, Minister Lyons called for a crackdown on food waste. It was estimated that Northern Ireland accounted for 25% of the content of our non-recycling bins.

I want to give a couple of examples to illustrate what has been done in my community. At the end of the day, major shopkeepers, including Asda and Tesco, give perishable goods to community groups, which in turn give them to needy families and elderly people. What they do is incredible. I never knew this until I went to see the local warehouse just before Christmas, but Jude Bailey, the lady in charge of it, also does great work by collecting chicken and ready-made meals. The companies keep that food for 24 hours, but after that time they give it to the warehouse group, which freezes it and in turn makes meals. I was really impressed by what it does. Its volunteers make a free meal for the community every day so that the food is not wasted. That is similar to what the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) described. People are incredibly kind. Jude and her team of committed Christians show their faith through helping others.

[*Jim Shannon*]

We waste not only food but a large amount energy, and there are carbon emissions associated with growing and transporting food. In Northern Ireland, we have successfully diverted 1 million tonnes of biodegradable waste from landfill since 2015, but there is still an excessive amount of waste to be addressed. We are all guilty of throwing out too much food and not making use of what we have in our kitchens, but we do not realise the full extent of the environmental damage that that can cause.

This will be a trip down memory lane for you, Ms Vaz. In the '60s, when I was a child, nothing was lost in our house—and I mean nothing. We owned a shop, and the family home got what we did not sell. That was not because the food was bad—I am a pensioner now, so it did not affect me in any way. I have held on to my health for many years, so that indicates that the food was okay. When the cheese went a bit blue, we cut off the blue bit and ate the rest, and it did not do us any harm. In this day and age, that probably would not happen, but we did it. Everything was used, and the collie dog got whatever we did not eat. My goodness me: as children in the '60s with a very capable family, we were examples of using everything in the house.

Mrs Hodgson: The hon. Gentleman is making a very good point that I did not make in my speech. He brought this figure to my mind: although we all think that waste in this country comes from supermarkets and restaurants, 70% is from households. Does he agree that we need to start in our own households, exactly as he is describing, if we want to solve the problem of food waste?

Jim Shannon: Absolutely, and that is the point that I am trying to make. I said to the Minister before the sitting that I do not expect him to give us all the answers. We have the answers individually and in our communities.

I am thankful that I have a very frugal wife who is careful with our grocery and shopping lists, but I understand the pressure on young families, who are busier now than I could ever imagine. Both parents work, and when they come home they carry out homework and take the kids to football or to Boys' Brigade or Girls' Brigade. When do they make meals? They have to rinse out containers for the recycling bin. They may envisage making dinner six times that week and buying groceries, but when the timings are changed for football or the school choir, or the kids need to be dropped off, it is hard for them to do that.

We have rightly moved away from girls-only home economics classes. I am impressed when I go to schools and see equal numbers of young boys in the same class, doing the same work and learning how to cook. Before I was married, it was bacon butties—toast and bacon under the grill. I will not say how often I used the grill and how often it was cleaned. I think I survived well as a single man, but when I got married, life changed. I thank the Lord it did.

It is clear from the figures that have been cited today that we need to take action. I am a great believer in education not simply changing our generation but equipping future generations with the tools to do better than we

are currently doing, and I will finish with this comment. Households on low budgets need help to know how best to use their food, but households with higher budgets need the same lessons, because this is not a tale of income; it is a tale of mindset, as the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) said. We all must change our mindsets to be better stewards of our resources, food, money and, of course, time.

10.9 am

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) on bringing this important debate to the Chamber.

The contribution that food waste makes to carbon emissions is well documented. More than 10 million tonnes of food is wasted every year in the UK alone, producing 18 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions, including methane, which is a most potent greenhouse gas. It degrades more quickly, but it is one of the most powerful greenhouse gases. Let us not forget that. The food waste index report indicates that 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions are due to food waste—five times more than the aviation sector, as has been mentioned. We mention the aviation sector a lot, but food waste is one of the main contributors to global warming.

Much is made of commercial food waste, and legislation is often targeted at it. However, according to the Office for National Statistics, more than half of food waste happens in the home, and the majority of food that is thrown away is considered edible. Though businesses must bear a higher responsibility for reporting commercial food waste, households must also be incentivised to reduce their own food waste. We heard a powerful comment about what people can do to change their mindsets about food and about what is edible and what is not. There is a lot that households can do to reduce waste by changing behaviour. The waste and resources action programme suggests measures such as ensuring that fresh food is refrigerated below 5°C and purchasing loose, rather than packaged, fruit and vegetables.

More can also be done on date labels. WRAP suggests not putting a label on uncut fresh produce, unless it can be shown that a best before date reduces overall food waste. We Liberal Democrats strongly believe that the UK must adopt circular economy techniques and cut resource use, waste and pollution by maximising recovery, reuse, recycling and remanufacturing. We can do so much better on recycling; too much organic waste is still landfilled or incinerated. Scotland will ban the landfilling of organic waste by 2025, but a similar ban in England will not come into effect until 2028. A 2025 ban would cut emissions by an extra 13% by 2030. Why are the Government not bringing that date forward?

There are many examples from the voluntary sector of the distribution of food that would otherwise go to waste. Organisations such as FareShare, which has been mentioned several times, play a pivotal role in diverting surplus food from the food industry. It redistributes food to a network of 8,500 charities across the nation. In my constituency of Bath last year, FareShare delivered the equivalent of more than 230,000 meals through 27 local organisations. That is an enormous amount, and we must congratulate FareShare on its incredible work.

However, it should not be down to voluntary organisations to plug the gaps that the Government allow to proliferate. We must address the underlying causes of food poverty and over-production. Businesses are not obliged to disclose their food waste data publicly. Will the Government consider bringing in mandatory reporting of food waste for businesses? Mandatory reporting was included in the Government's resources and waste strategy, among other legislative changes, such as a mandatory food waste prevention target. The changes in the strategy have been broadly welcomed by many, and dozens of large supermarkets have called for voluntary reporting to become mandatory, but we are yet to see the strategy implemented. Could the Government indicate when it will be?

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Wera Hobhouse: I am worried about others wanting to speak, so I will not.

Reducing food waste and improving food distribution is an opportunity to encourage sustainable, community-driven initiatives that reduce food waste and food miles. Recent research has indicated that the UK could grow up to 40% of its own fruit and vegetables by using urban green spaces. Liberal Democrats want to restore market garden hinterlands around our towns and cities. That would reduce food miles, provide satisfying jobs and reduce food waste and packaging. It would be a combination of small and medium-sized enterprise and community-supported agriculture.

In my constituency, projects such as CropDrop do incredible work to bridge the gap between locally grown produce and those in need. Since its inception, CropDrop has been a beacon of sustainability, highlighting the importance of allotment access and minimising the waste of locally grown food. In 2020 alone—its first year of operation—CropDrop completed over 150 journeys, delivering an estimated 21,000 meals. That is a prime example of the circular economy that Liberal Democrats want to see implemented across the UK.

Reducing food miles from plant to plate reduces emissions as well as wastage. However, we cannot leave filling the gap to the voluntary sector. The Government need to step up and act on this issue with a sense of urgency. Already inadequate action to address food waste has been delayed. Meanwhile, more food continues to go to landfill and emissions continue. We can do better.

10.15 am

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) for securing this debate.

I want to take two different lines. One is the household; many people have made reference to the amount of food waste generated within the home. I will give a small example of what is happening. Many community groups in my constituency have identified that homes are under tremendous pressure, not just from the cost of living; their budgets are being squeezed in every way. These groups have made efforts to bring people together to educate those in the home who are cooking, providing and doing the shopping on how they can prepare meals and generate a shopping list.

Unfortunately, the way in which our supermarkets are laid out is not necessarily helpful. We used to walk into a shop with a list, and we would get what we wanted from behind the counter. Now we walk around the shop and everything is put out to tempt us to say, "Well, I think I need this." Whenever I go shopping, my wife always says that it costs us twice as much as whenever she does it. My eyes are always bigger than my belly, and unfortunately I decide that certain things are needed when, to be truthful, they are not.

A number of community groups in my area have been running programmes where they are bringing people in, and are learning them how to put together a menu and to shop for a week. We have already heard that almost 70% of food waste is generated in the home and about how we can deal with that. We produce almost 11 million tonnes of food waste in the United Kingdom. That predominately goes to landfill, producing methane. There are other ways to deal with that waste rather than sending it to landfill. We can recover energy from our food waste by using technology.

Worldwide, 1.3 billion tonnes of food is wasted. Much of that is down to lifestyle and how we have learned to be a consumable society; and, as a consequence, we produce far more food than we could ever usefully use. My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said that whenever he was young, the shop would look at whatever was left and see what was close to its end—not its sell-by date, because sometimes the sell-by date does not mean the food cannot be consumed.

Food used to be more local; we are now a global market, and our food comes from all over the world. That contributes to part of the problem because we have created different tastes within our society, including people wanting to eat certain foods that are not produced locally. We used to eat berries that were only produced at certain times of the year. Now we want them all year, so they have to be brought in. We have generated a consumable society that is fuelled by what we have on our shelves.

It is important that we put measures in place. The Food Waste (Reduction) Bill was introduced to Westminster in 2015. Certain parts of that legislation have been mentioned this morning. There are parts we want to encourage, and the large retailers have taken a lead in many areas. We should support them totally; on many occasions, they are ahead of what we are attempting to do as legislators. Certain measures should be brought in, including tax breaks for those who are efficient and do not produce much waste. That has to be considered as an opportunity.

Generally, we should be encouraging the housewife—maybe that is the wrong term to use—or those who are cooking in the home to be far more efficient about what they put on the table and what they do whenever they go out shopping, and ensure that we do not buy more than we can consume. That message will go back. I want to thank those charities that have been so successful in putting forward the FareShare scheme and the food reduction system. The Too Good To Go scheme is also fantastic; I was unaware of it until recently. I again thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central for securing this debate.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. We have two more speakers before we take the wind-ups at 10.28 am, so they have roughly four minutes each.

10.21 am

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It is a privilege to see you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I would like to cover three subjects. First, I will speak about the benefits of redistribution. Secondly, I will pay tribute to some brilliant community groups, from which I think we can probably all learn. Thirdly, I will talk a little bit about a specific proposal for the Minister today, relating to the emissions trading scheme.

A few years ago, takeaway baguette retailers would boast that if the sandwiches did not sell within three hours, they would be destroyed. I am so pleased that there has been a revolution in our thinking about food waste. We have heard that in 2021 over 10 million tonnes of food went to waste in the UK; that is still a staggering amount, but at least people are now starting to think about how they can avoid food waste. Still, £250 per person is wasted each year from food going in the bin. That is an absolutely huge sum.

I would like to pay tribute to some fantastic community groups. The Foodsave initiative in the part of East Devon that I represent is fantastic. This time last week, I was in the village of Beer, a former fishing village. There is such a strong sense of camaraderie in the food redistribution initiatives like Foodsave. I saw the hall being laid out with so much excess food that had been sought from retailers, including supermarkets. Then at 12.30 pm, the doors opened and in flocked tens of people from the local area to take food, with absolutely no stigma—and why should there be? They were not just alleviating poverty; they were saving food, saving money and avoiding waste. There is a big distinction between what food banks do, with referrals, and what redistribution organisations like Foodsave do. I pay particular tribute to Mike McAlpine from Beer Foodsave and to Jake Bonetta, who set up the initiative in Honiton.

I also want to talk about the time I spent at ReROOTed community café in Tiverton, which operates on a pay-as-you-feel basis. I went there several Saturdays ago and I cleared some plates—not only in the way a waiter does, clearing up after people have eaten, but also by eating the food that they had put together from scraps and morsels. It was absolutely delicious.

Lastly, I have a very specific point to make and a recommendation for the Minister. Given that we reckon that 18 million tonnes of CO₂ was released into the atmosphere from the UK in 2021 due to food waste, we really have to think about how we can offset it. The Foodsave initiative—Jake Bonetta and co—has come up with a fantastic proposal. At the moment, the UK-wide emissions trading scheme generates over £4.5 billion—that was the case a couple of years ago anyway—but the Government are spending as little as 20% of the money received through the emissions trading scheme on cutting domestic emissions. What if the voluntary carbon market, which is unregulated, could be used for redistributing some of the funds to some of the community-based organisations that I have described? The Minister will sum up shortly and I encourage him to consider that redistribution scheme operators, such as Foodsave, are expressly eligible to sell their carbon offsetting through the scheme.

10.25 am

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) for securing this important debate.

The food system is not working. People in this country struggle with food security and are living in food poverty. Much of our food waste ends up in landfill, thus contributing to greenhouse gas emissions. The Food Foundation has found that the poorest 20% in society would need to spend half their disposable income to afford the healthy diet recommended by the NHS. Food waste is a significant issue with vast environmental, social and economic implications. We need to redesign the food system to meet everyone's needs.

Mandatory reporting of food waste for big businesses is key if we want to understand how much food is being wasted. The Government have shown a remarkable level of indecision over whether to move from voluntary to mandatory reporting, but I was pleased that the current DEFRA Secretary decided last year to reconsider the decision not to implement mandatory reporting, but I am still concerned that that is after six years of delays. With the benefits so clear, I hope that the Minister will take this opportunity to confirm the timescale for the decision being made.

There is a real lack of information on pre-farm gate food waste, but WRAP estimates that there could be 1.6 million to 3.5 million tonnes a year. I was out talking to a farmer near Castle Cary about this recently and she told me how heartbreaking it is; and as a farmer's daughter, I also know that. Sadly, much pre-farm gate food waste is driven by unfair supermarket buying practices in the just-in-time food supply model. If farmers fail to produce enough food for supermarkets, they can be hit with penalties that can drive over-production of food to ensure that targets are met. Supermarkets can negotiate contracts that give them flexibility to cancel or reduce orders at the last minute, whereas farmers are more likely to be tied into contracts that leave them with surplus food that they cannot sell elsewhere. We need to give the Groceries Code Adjudicator more teeth to stop that practice and to ensure that there is more fairness in the supply chain.

Riverford Organic Farmers has spearheaded the fairness in farming campaign, and late last year its survey of British fruit and veg farmers revealed that 49% feared they would go out of business within the year. Many cited supermarket behaviour as a major reason for that. The relentless desire of supermarkets to sell pre-packaged food also drives pre-farm gate food waste. Perpetual BOGOF—buy one, get one free—deals, and fruit and veg sold in plastic packaging, encourage consumers to buy more than they may use and force farmers to discard produce that does not fit into the specifications.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. I call the SNP spokesperson.

10.28 am

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is nice to see you in the Chair this morning, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) for securing this important debate on food waste and redistribution.

As the SNP spokesperson for the environment and food, I welcome the opportunity to address this issue, which plagues our society: wastage and the unconscionable amount of food waste that we allow to happen each and every year. I will also highlight some of the excellent work being undertaken in Scotland in relation to this subject. It is not just a matter of leftovers on our plates, as important as that is; it is also about the obscene waste of perfectly good, nutritious food while people in our communities the length and breadth of these isles and beyond go hungry.

Deidre Brock: The managing director of Too Good To Go, an organisation that has been mentioned several times this morning, has said that the UK Government's refusal to introduce mandatory food waste reporting is a blow to the UK food waste reduction waste efforts. There has been a lot of criticism about the constant delays on this issue. The European Commission has proposed introducing legally binding targets to try to limit food waste across the EU, leaving the UK behind once again in progressive regulation. Is my hon. Friend as dismayed as I am at the Government's intransigence on this vital issue?

Steven Bonnar: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. She makes excellent points. We are all frustrated with the Government's intransigence, not just in this area but right across the food, environment and rural affairs spectrum; some of the matters are really disappointing. I know that she is keen on these particular issues and that she has done some excellent work on them, so I commend her for that.

The food waste numbers are stark. In Scotland alone, we waste a staggering 1 million tonnes of food and drink every single year. Shockingly, around 60% of that waste originates within households, with an additional 25% of it coming from food and drink manufacturing. That is enough food to feed countless hungry families, yet it ends up rotting in landfill, emitting harmful greenhouse gases and contributing to the very climate crisis that we are also threatened by.

This issue is not just about individual actions, important as they are. It is about a systematic failure: the failure of the UK Government to take decisive action to address this issue, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) has just said. Instead, they prefer to prioritise their own narrow political agendas over the wellbeing of our planet and our people.

However, perhaps most frustrating is the fact that so much of the waste is entirely avoidable. We know that 70% of food waste is still edible and that preventing such waste in the first place is not only morally imperative but economically and environmentally sound.

Sarah Dyke: I recently visited Frome community fridge, which is the first organisation of its kind in the country. The people there told me that since it was established in 2016 they have been able to fill the equivalent of eight Wembley stadiums with surplus food. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this kind of innovative project is really important in helping us to reduce food waste?

Steven Bonnar: The hon. Member is absolutely right. In fact, that is a great analogy. Wembley stadium is massive. The thought of eight Wembleys stacked up—we can all visualise that right now—is absolutely obscene.

Research has shown that achieving a 58% per capita reduction in food waste by 2050 could remove the equivalent of 5.6 million cars from UK roads, which of course would significantly mitigate our carbon outputs. Also, let us not forget the impact on households struggling to make ends meet. We have heard of so many groups and organisations, like the one that the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke) mentioned, that are doing stellar work in relation to food insecurity across all our constituencies. Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill is no different from any other constituency in that regard and I hope that the SNP's appreciation of all of those groups and organisations is very clear.

Over a third of Scots worry about their ability to afford food, especially in the face of both a cost of living crisis and the disastrous effects of Brexit, which have only served to exacerbate the situation. The National Farmers Union has reported that crops worth over £60 million were left to rot in fields due to Tory-induced labour shortages and indeed other factors, while supermarket shelves are bare, prices are rocketing and people are being left devoid of the essentials that they so rely on.

Fortunately for those of us in Scotland, there is hope on the horizon. The Scottish Government have taken bold steps to address food waste head-on. In 2018, they committed to reducing Scotland's food waste by 33%, which set a precedent across the rest of Europe. Through regulations and partnerships with organisations such as Zero Waste Scotland and FareShare, whose excellent work we have heard so much about today, the SNP has implemented measures to reduce waste at every level, from production to distribution and all the way through to consumption. We have also improved monitoring and have put infrastructure programmes in place to enhance public engagement and communication. We are leaving no stone unturned in the fight to reduce food waste.

The UK Government must now follow Scotland's lead and take decisive action on food waste. The Environmental Audit Committee's report "Environmental Change and Food Security" has called for a national strategy to tackle this issue, echoing much of what the Scottish Government have already implemented, so I hope that the Minister will look kindly on that recommendation. Let us all renew our commitment to reducing food waste and building a more sustainable future for the generations to come.

10.34 am

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): As always, it is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. It has been a busy few weeks for DEFRA since we were all last together, with the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries knighted and the Secretary of State overriding his civil servants. Anyone would think there was a major event coming up soon. Perhaps the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore), can pass on our congratulations to his colleague, whose knighthood is very well deserved. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) on securing today's debate, on all the work she has done as chair of the national food strategy all-party parliamentary group and on her excellent introduction to the debate.

[Daniel Zeichner]

Nobody wants to see good food wasted, but the scale of food waste in the UK is shocking, as many contributions this morning have outlined, with 3.3 million tonnes of UK food wasted on farms every year and 2.9 million tonnes of farm produce that could still be eaten going to landfill, incineration or waste treatment plants. UK on-farm food waste alone is estimated to use an area of agricultural land half the size of Wales—we have heard lots of similar comparisons this morning—and that land could be used to help sustainably feed the UK and restore nature to address the biodiversity and climate crises.

After leaving the farm gate, the UK food supply chain and households currently waste 9.5 million tonnes of food every year, 70% of which could have been eaten. This annual waste has an approximate cost of £19 billion and causes emissions of 36 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent—a point made very well by my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson). That means that over a quarter of all the food grown in the UK is never eaten, and this wasted harvest counts for between 6% and 7% of total UK greenhouse gas emissions. Of course, this is at the same time that 2.1 million people in the UK are living in a household that has used a food bank in the last 12 months.

As has been mentioned today, high food inflation also hits poorer families much more severely, forcing them into buying cheaper, less healthy food at best, or hunger at worst. As the Food Foundation recently pointed out, if poorer families were buying the lowest priced fruit and veg available, it would cost between 34% and 52% of one person's weekly food budget to afford a week's worth of the recommended five a day. That is twice as much as the 17% to 26% for the wealthiest 10% of families. Despite the high prices, too many farmers and growers increasingly despair when it comes to being able to make a living, particularly in the face of cheap, lower standard imports. As we discussed in last month's food security debate, this is leaving the UK vulnerable to global supply shocks and disruptions.

Henry Dimbleby's national food strategy and others have pointed to some of the causes of food waste that run throughout the supply chain. We have heard much about them this morning—it is familiar stuff: vegetables grown for a market that has dried up; wonky carrots cast aside; wasted peelings; unappetising meat offcuts; over-ordered food, which supermarkets or restaurants cannot sell; food we bought but no longer fancy at home; and food that rots because of a shortage of labour to harvest it or while stuck in post-Brexit queues at the border. There are problems, it seems, at every stage through our system. But there are also opportunities, and—as ever in this country—there are plenty of good initiatives.

With the encouragement of WRAP and the food waste reduction road map, almost a third of large UK food businesses are implementing “target, measure, act”, representing almost 60% of the overall turnover for UK food manufacture, retail, and hospitality and food service. The redistribution of food by groups and businesses that we have heard much about this morning, such as FareShare and Too Good To Go, helps to feed hungry people through food banks and is of course praiseworthy,

but frankly we should not kid ourselves. Voluntary waste reduction and surplus redistribution can, at best, only ever be short-term sticking plaster solutions to food waste, poverty and hunger.

The food waste and surpluses created arise from market failures in the food supply chain. Not only can the Government act to redress them; they committed to a target in last year's environmental improvement plan, to reduce food waste by 50% by 1 January 2028 in line with the UN sustainable development goal 12.3—but I am afraid that the evidence is that food waste levels have not decreased overall relative to baselines. Furthermore, since 2018, despite huge efforts from some businesses, there has actually been an increase, if waste by producers and manufacturers is included. Including inedible parts, businesses produced 5% more food waste in 2021 compared to baseline, with a 9% increase from producers and manufacturers.

Does the Minister accept that the problem of food waste has actually got worse? Can he tell us whether the 50% reduction target will be achieved in 2028? If not, what further measures does he plan to take? Will he strengthen the remit of the Groceries Code Adjudicator with an explicit focus on tackling unfair trading practices that lead to food waste?

Will the Minister finally deliver on requiring food waste to be monitored and reported through the supply chain, because businesses—as we have heard—are clear about the importance of a level playing field to ensure that all supply chain participants use better-practice methodology with robust processes to capture and measure their food loss? Does he agree with them that voluntary actions are inadequate, and that the continued failure of many businesses to reduce food waste risks undermining the progress that has been achieved voluntarily?

Businesses supporting mandatory food-waste reporting know that identifying and reporting their waste will enable them to drive down costs and to improve their efficiency and productivity. It is not surprising that the Government's response to the consultation rejecting regulation faced a legal challenge on the ground of irrationality, given all the evidence in their own impact assessment that costs can be recouped with only a small reduction in food waste. The Secretary of State was therefore right to withdraw his predecessor's consultation response last November, but, as we have heard, we still have no decision. Instead, the Secretary of State told WRAP to run yet another consultation and said that any decision could still be another six months away. Will the Minister tell us today whether we are any nearer a mandatory scheme being introduced?

Finally, on labour shortages, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee found clear evidence that food insecurity and food waste have increased significantly, with food left in the fields to rot because of lack of labour. It is 10 months since the publication of John Shropshire's independent review into labour shortages in the food supply chain. What is the Government's strategy for preventing yet more waste? Where is the response to the Shropshire report, which the Farming Minister promised that we would see last autumn?

Let me conclude by reiterating that for us it is clear that food security is national security. Labour will back our food producers by ensuring that we buy, sell, make and grow more of our food here at home, entrenching our reputation as a beacon for quality food, high standards

and ethical treatment of animals. We will ensure that more of our British-grown and reared produce ends up on people's plates, using the Government's purchasing power to back British produce with 50% of food in our hospitals, army bases and prisons locally grown or certified to higher environmental standards. We will work with business to design and deliver a proper food waste monitoring programme. Put simply, it is time to end the waste.

10.42 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Robbie Moore): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz.

I am grateful to all Members who have spoken in this debate. In particular, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) for raising this important issue. Over many years—in fact, for all the years she has been in this place—she has championed challenging the complexities and ensuring that we are doing our best as a country to reduce food waste. I thank her for her efforts.

No one wants to see good food going to waste. It harms the environment and is bad for business. The UK is an international leader on tackling food waste, and we are fully committed to meeting the target of the UN's sustainable development goal 12.3, which seeks to halve global food waste at consumer and retail levels by 2030. I will try to respond to all the many and various themes raised by Members, but I will start by addressing household food waste, which in my view—I think all of us would agree—is the biggest opportunity for us to meet the 2030 target to reduce food waste, because 60% of food that is wasted in the UK is wasted by citizens in their own homes. That is 4.7 million tonnes of food, which could be eaten, being thrown away every single year.

Action needs to be taken across the supply chain and in the home. We are supportive of consumer awareness campaigns delivered by WRAP, including Food Waste Action Week and Love Food Hate Waste, which helps citizens reduce their food waste. The current focus is moving retailers to sell more loose fruit and vegetables so that people can buy what they need, which reduces waste and saves plastic, I hope reducing the need for as much packaging as there is in the retail network.

Wera Hobhouse: Twenty years ago, I was a councillor with responsibility for waste, and we had the same issue then. What has happened in the meantime? In 20 years of being aware of household food waste, what has happened?

Robbie Moore: Let me highlight some stats that have been presented to me and the Department by WRAP. From the 2007 baseline to 2021, total post-farm-gate waste has dropped by 18.3% and households are wasting 17% less than in 2007. Of course we recognise that household waste is still too high, and we are doing our utmost to reduce it. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about education and improving food technology and home economics lessons, so that everyone going through the education system has a better understanding of ingredients, nutritional values and the quantities needed to produce good-quality meals.

All speakers today have referred to the request for mandatory food waste reporting. We support Courtauld's delivery of the food waste reduction road map, which provides guidance to businesses on identifying and measuring food waste and food surplus. We support the "target, measure, act" approach, as it enables food businesses to drive down food waste through measuring their surplus and waste. It also shines a light on any surplus that arises and how to get it to redistributors.

We consulted on improving the voluntary approach with options that included making it mandatory for large businesses. Members will be aware that when the Secretary of State took up his position in November last year, alongside a new ministerial team that includes me, our determination was to review previous decisions. We are gathering new evidence to make the most informed decision using the latest available data. We look forward to making that decision soon.

I have met Too Good To Go in my constituency, through a visit to Booths supermarket in Ilkley. It is a fantastic organisation, which I hope will be rolled out further in the north-east, if it is not there yet—I can certainly confirm that it is in Yorkshire and working its way north. I took on board the points it made in its request to roll out mandatory reporting, which is being considered by the Secretary of State as we speak.

Daniel Zeichner: I am sure that the Minister heard the enthusiasm for mandatory reporting from a number of Members. What is causing the Government not to go forward, given that businesses want it to happen?

Robbie Moore: A previous Secretary of State made the decision to go for a voluntary approach, and it is right that the new team are reviewing that decision, alongside various stakeholders. As I have said, we aim to make an announcement soon.

The Government strongly support the surplus food redistribution sector because we recognise the environmental and social benefits of making sure that good food is eaten rather than wasted. Since 2018 we have provided nearly £13 million in funding to increase the capacity of the sector, funding infrastructure such as warehouse facilities, freezer units and temperature-controlled vans, taking great strides in improving the capacity of redistributors to access, transport, process, store and ultimately redistribute surplus to people in need. The results of our investment and the hard work of all people involved in the redistribution sector are reflected in the latest report from WRAP, which shows that the total amount of food redistributed in the UK in 2022 was more than 170,000 tonnes. That has a value of around £590 million and is the equivalent of more than 404 million meals. That is an increase of 133% since 2019.

Hon. Members have raised examples of good voluntary schemes in their constituencies. I commend the work done by the Company Shop Group in the constituency of the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who noted that 6.3 million meals have been saved that would otherwise have gone to landfill. It is good to recognise the work that is going on in our constituencies. As well as meeting Too Good to Go, I met with Olio just yesterday to discuss its app-based system. A great deal of work is going on in the private sector and in voluntary schemes to reduce food waste.

[*Robbie Moore*]

My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) raised particular on-farm issues, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central. In addition to the work on post-farm-gate surpluses, the Prime Minister announced at the National Farmers Union conference earlier this year action to tackle surplus food on farms, with a £15 million fund to redirect that surplus into the hands of those who need it. We will provide further details in coming months. We are working with stakeholders to ensure the scheme works adequately and appropriately, to make the most positive impact on reducing food waste.

We seek a productive and efficient farming sector that prevents waste from occurring in the first place. We are supporting investment in productivity, boosting equipment, technology and infrastructure through the farming investment fund, which provides grants to farmers and growers that will help their businesses prosper, while improving their productivity and enhancing the environment.

WRAP supports the measures that the Government are rolling out. It recognises that the total amount of edible food on UK farms that might be suitable for redistribution is approximately 330,000 tonnes per annum, or about 10% of the total of 3.6 million tonnes surplus and waste estimated to be generated on farms. The Government are working with various stakeholders, including WRAP, to address how to minimise and redistribute on-farm food waste.

The hon. Members for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) and for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke) spoke about the supply chain and contracts. We have taken steps through the fair dealings powers awarded by the Agriculture Act 2020 to clamp down on unfair contract practices. Last December, we launched a review into fairness in the fresh produce supply chain. We are analysing responses and will soon publish a summary of them, as well as our proposed next steps. We intend to work with stakeholders to explore how those powers could be exercised to reduce those concerns and provide more certainty to farmers, who are being negatively impacted by some of the decisions supermarkets are making through unfair practices in their supply chain contracts.

Many hon. Members raised challenges related to kerbside collection of food waste. The food and drink surplus and waste hierarchy lays out clear guidance for the use and disposal of surplus food and waste. We ask all businesses to take into account the measures that the Government wish to take, particularly in relation to the food hierarchy—first, to prevent food waste, followed by the redistribution of food surplus to those who need it, and, as a last resort, to end up as animal feed. There is tax relief when businesses donate to charity.

There will always be some waste that cannot be prevented. The hierarchy prefers disposal of that waste through anaerobic digestion rather than landfill, because of its recognised negative impacts on the environment. Whatever preventative and reduction actions are taken, some food waste will arise. Anaerobic digestion is the Government's preferred option for recycling food that eventually ends up as waste. Treating food waste through

anaerobic digestion removes it from the residual waste stream, where it can end up in landfill and create harmful greenhouse gases.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central asked how local authorities would roll out kerbside collection of food waste. Under section 45 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, as amended by the Environment Act 2021, we will require all local authorities in England to arrange weekly collection of food waste for recycling. It is frustrating that my local authority in Bradford does not collect food waste; other hon. Members said the same. There is a disparity in what local authorities across England are doing. The Government want to make it clear that all local authorities must adhere to this measure. The waste must always be collected separately from residual waste and dry recyclable materials, so that it can be recycled appropriately. The Act also requires non-household municipal premises, such as businesses, hospitals and schools, to arrange food waste recycling collections.

On simpler recycling, in the Government response published last October we announced that the requirements must be implemented by 31 March 2025 for non-household municipal premises in England such as hospitals, schools and businesses; by 31 March 2026 for kerbside collection for domestic properties; and by 31 March 2027 for microbusinesses. DEFRA has up to £295 million in capital funding to roll out weekly food waste collections across England. The Government will also provide resource funding to be spent from this financial year to support local authorities to implement food waste collections.

The Government are committed to preventing and driving down food waste. We are supporting prevention initiatives and taking action to get surplus food into the redistribution system. That is crucial to ensure that it does not end up in landfill or anaerobic digestion. We are helping businesses to be more resilient and efficient and to cut costs while protecting the environment, and helping citizens with advice on how they can reduce their food waste and save money.

I thank all Members for their contributions today, and particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central for securing this important debate.

10.56 am

Jo Gideon: I, too, thank everybody who has taken part in the debate. All hon. Members share the view that we have to do something about food waste. It is not party political, and the tone of the debate was appropriate. I thank the Minister and look forward with bated breath to the announcement on mandatory reporting. I know that he is still gathering evidence, but hopefully we will get a good outcome.

As we reflect on the importance of food in our lives, with 11 million people in the UK experiencing food insecurity and charities struggling to help, I think everybody agrees that we have to address the scandal of the volume of food waste at all stages in the supply chain. That demands a concerted effort across all sectors—Government, industry, farmers and consumers. What the hon. Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) said resonated with me, because I buy more than I need to. I still shop as though I have a family at home, even though they have long since moved out. We all share the responsibility for doing something about that.

By increasing awareness, implementing effective policies, fostering innovation and supporting grassroots efforts, we can transform surplus into sustenance, ensuring that nobody goes hungry, while simultaneously safeguarding our resources and planning for future generations.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered food waste and food distribution.

Citizens' Assemblies and Local Democracy

10.59 am

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I will call Debbie Abrahams to move the motion and I will then call the Minister to respond. As is the convention for a 30-minute debate, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered citizens' assemblies and local democracy.

It is lovely to see you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I am absolutely delighted to lead this Westminster Hall debate on how citizens' assemblies can be used to enhance public engagement in political decision making, bringing benefits to our democracy and society as a whole.

As hon. Members may know, last month I introduced the Standards in Public Life (Codes of Conduct) Bill to Parliament. Many people across our great country and nation states feel that the UK Parliament—including MPs and Ministers who sit in this place—is disconnected from them and their lives. It is not just the poor behaviour of a few bad apples affecting how people feel; there is a much deeper malaise.

People have a growing lack of trust and confidence in politics and politicians. Last year, a King's College London study of 24 countries found that the UK fares poorly in people's confidence in the Government, political parties and even Parliament. Added to that, there is a marked difference by generation. Young people have experienced some of the biggest shifts in attitude: confidence in the Government among millennials in Britain has halved since 2005, falling to its lowest level on record, and generation Z has very low confidence in a wide range of other institutions, too.

In the Hansard Society's audit of political engagement series, which was carried out between 2004 and 2019, people reported an increasing sense of powerlessness and disengagement over time. Similarly, polling by the think-tank Compassion in Politics showed that four out of five people have no respect for politicians, and that 40% of parents would be concerned if their child expressed a desire to become a politician, which is worrying if we want our democracy not just to survive but to thrive.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing forward this debate. I always do research on these matters. Northern Ireland is fortunate to have its own citizens' assembly with 75 members, which passed three high-level resolutions that made recommendations on the core themes of social care, change and strong leadership. Is the hon. Lady aware of Northern Ireland's citizens' assembly? Does she believe that it can foster better communication between people and their elected representatives? If so, would she add her support to it?

Debbie Abrahams: I was not specifically aware of the citizens' assembly in Northern Ireland, although I am aware of many across our nation states and in other countries. They are seen as a mechanism by which elected representatives can maintain contact with their constituents on various policy issues throughout a political cycle.

[Debbie Abrahams]

Polling from the Institute for Government recently showed that two thirds of constituents do not think that the current Government behave to high ethical standards. Likewise, polling from the UK Anti-Corruption Coalition found that two thirds of voters believe that UK politics is becoming more corrupt. We know that when socio-economic inequalities are narrow, trust between different communities and groups increases, and the reverse is true when the inequalities widen. Of course, that is the situation we find ourselves in at the moment.

There are other good reasons for greater public engagement and deliberative policymaking, including through citizens' assemblies. Before I was elected to this place, I served as a public health consultant and academic. My work was focused on tackling health inequalities and their main determinants—inequalities in income, wealth and power. It may surprise hon. Members to hear that there is an independent and universal effect on our health and wellbeing that relates to our status in a hierarchy. The process of engaging people in decision making and sharing that power has a positive impact on their health and wellbeing, in addition to leading to the development of better politics based on lived experience and consensus.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): How does a few people sitting in a citizens' assembly enhance the involvement of the public? Is it not in fact completely undemocratic and contrary to the involvement of the public, who have the right to elect and unelect us?

Debbie Abrahams: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. I will explain more about how it adds to and does not detract from the role of elected representatives, and the benefits of that.

The European values study and the world values survey have tracked changes in individuals' perceptions of freedom and control over time. Worryingly, they found that low perceptions of freedom and control were associated with rising populist support. When people do not feel engaged in society and their local community, decisions are made about them without them. When politicians do not have their interests at heart, not only do they lose faith in democracy and seek political extremes, but it has an impact on their health. That is why citizens' assemblies and active participative policymaking in general are important. By engaging with and empowering people on the issues that matter to them all year round, we help to give them more control over their lives and a far greater stake in our society.

John Spellar: Essentially, having a few people in a citizens' assembly does not involve the public. The public will get involved this year in a general election; that is how the public get involved and engaged. They may feel that the results of that election are not reflective, because the great and the good and financial sources may influence things more than they should, but none of that affects the general public. The latest referendum in Ireland might demonstrate that.

Debbie Abrahams: Again, I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. I am afraid that the evidence does not bear that out. It does not replace the role of elected representatives, as he seems to suggest, but

enhances it. I urge him to listen to what I am saying; I am happy to supply evidence of the evaluations of the benefits.

There may be questions about—even some resistance to—the notion of citizens' assemblies because of the Burkean belief that policymaking is a job for elected representatives. Let me be clear that citizens' assemblies do not replace the ultimate decision-making role of elected representatives: they enhance it by providing considered evidence and recommendations to inform that decision making.

Very briefly, citizens' assemblies are representative groups of people, selected at random through the lottery principle. They are tasked with examining an issue in depth and making recommendations. Such assemblies have been used by many policymakers in the UK and elsewhere to assist in policy decision making. An evaluation is taking place in a swathe of the democracies that constitute the OECD, because of the value that has been seen. Citizens' assemblies have been used by Governments in their policymaking, and have even formed part of some countries' constitutions—for example, Ireland has that important role as part of its constitution. Famously, Ireland used citizens' assemblies to examine delicate and sensitive matters such as abortion and same-sex marriage.

John Spellar: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Debbie Abrahams: I will, for the last time.

John Spellar: Did they use this in the recent referendum?

Debbie Abrahams: The last one they used it in was about 10 years ago, and we had an in-depth analysis from the people who ran that about two years ago.

In 2018, two Select Committees undertook a citizens' assembly on social care, and in 2019-20, six Select Committees commissioned one to look at climate change. I was an official observer of that process. I was so impressed with how it was organised, from the selection of citizens and facilitation of the evidence sessions to the consensus on the development of recommendations. The interviews I did with participants were incredibly powerful, and everyone seemed to get so much out of it.

I have long been convinced of the importance of participative, deliberative decision making in policy development and reviews, and I believe that citizens' assemblies could be an incredibly powerful tool for that. However, as a politician who believes passionately in evidence-based policy, the evidence from the recent evaluation of citizens' assemblies, including an independent evaluation of the climate assembly pilot, is also encouraging. The "Evaluation of Climate Assembly UK" report states:

"Our overriding conclusion is that CAUK was a highly valuable process that enabled a diverse group of UK citizens to engage in parliamentary scrutiny of government on climate policy in an informed and meaningful manner. The case demonstrates a significant step forward in the UK Parliament's public engagement strategy and based on our evidence, they should seek to establish more citizens' assemblies in the future to feed into the scrutiny work of their select committee process."

I hope that as we move towards the general election, we discuss not only what our policies will be but how we will develop and review them with people locally and nationally.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Ind): My hon. Friend is making an interesting speech. The criticism I hear from the public is that politicians talk too much and do too little. People want things done. Across our institutions—national, devolved and even local—politicians seem to be desiring to abrogate responsibility. Politicians need to make decisions. Politicians need to get things done. That is what people want.

Debbie Abrahams: I would not disagree with my hon. Friend. As I said earlier, citizens' assemblies do not remove the responsibility of politicians to make those decisions, but ensure that those decisions are better informed and based on evidence, and that we have support from our constituents.

From artificial intelligence to air quality and assisted dying, citizens' assemblies could be an invaluable tool. Crucially, we cannot treat general elections simply as a referendum held once every five years and just expect the British people to suck it up when policies change or new policies emerge between elections. Rather, general and other elections must be part of a process of deliberative democracy that engages with the people that we represent and serve, all year round, locally and nationally.

11.12 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Simon Hoare): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz, and to reply to the debate ably introduced by the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams).

Let me begin, as I always like to, by trying to find a point of agreement with whoever has raised the debate. The hon. Lady is right to talk about the importance of trust in politics and engagement in our political processes. Like all advanced, mature western democracies, we are living in difficult times. With social media, conspiracy theories, different people with competing views, the rise of populism and an uncertain world with many big geopolitical and environmental questions, no wonder a lot of people feel disconnected and discombobulated.

Public engagement is key. One of the strengths of our country, as the inbox of any right hon. or hon. Member will attest, is that we have very vibrant lobbying, including from the third sector, on a whole range of issues. I have been doing this job for eight and a half years and am still surprised by some of the groups out there that wish, perfectly properly, to make their views on certain issues known to their Members of Parliament.

We have vibrant, open and democratic political parties. Our advice surgeries are a wonderful opportunity to provide mini citizens' assemblies, effectively, at which individuals or groups of constituents can come and talk to us about issues that are important to them.

I think we occasionally underplay our power to convene. We can convene all sorts of public or private meetings in our constituencies and invite people, either on a select list or via open invitation. I have done something very similar on environmental and climate change issues: I issued an open invitation and a whole raft of people in my constituency came, across the age groups. They certainly improved my knowledge and understanding of the issues. I hope also to hear, from the political perspective, some of the checks and balances and some of the challenges that the democratic process throws up.

There are ways currently being deployed to maximise public engagement and therefore, hopefully, to grow and inculcate trust. However, I do not subscribe, and nor do the Government, to the hon. Lady's argument. She has put forward a perfectly respectable argument, and she has evidenced it as she has seen fit, but it is a question of judgment. As we all know, to govern is to choose, and often there are competing options. I do not think that we would address some of the fundamental problems that she set out at the opening of her speech by defaulting to the creation of citizens' assemblies.

The right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) almost gave my speech for me.

John Spellar *rose*—

Simon Hoare: Almost as if the right hon. Gentleman had been pre-timed, he is on his feet. I give way.

John Spellar: The Minister rightly says that the essence of exercises such as citizens' assemblies is that they will deal with a narrow issue. The Government then have to choose between priorities: that is where essential political decisions get taken. There is then the opportunity for the British public to decide whether they like the direction of travel. Does he agree that we need to listen to campaigning groups, which play an important part in our democracy, but that ultimately it is the broader public who have to decide?

Simon Hoare: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. One of the great strengths of single-issue pressure groups is that they bring a whole wealth and range of in-depth knowledge on a particular system or issue. The downside is that a single-issue pressure group or campaigner does not look at the larger picture or take the balance. It does not have to govern by choosing. I have seen a lot of evidence to suggest that membership of single-issue pressure groups has gone up, but the mixed potpourri—the Woolworths pick 'n' mix—of joining a political party, where people have to give and take and trim and tack, has proven less popular, particularly among younger people.

Debbie Abrahams: I think that there is a misunderstanding. Citizens' assemblies are not about replacing decision making, but about trying to provide an evidence-based rather than lobby-based approach for a particular vested interest. Evidence is provided to the participants of the citizens' assembly that is balanced and comprehensive and allows people to come to a consensus on a recommendation to policymakers, who then decide. This discussion has completely misrepresented what citizens' assemblies are about. They are about the engagement of people with a particular policy issue.

Simon Hoare: I am not entirely sure that the hon. Lady has helped her cause with that further amplification of what she means by citizens' assemblies. The point that the right hon. Member for Warley made was the right one: what will the outcome be? If one stands as an independent candidate, free from a party Whip and from supporting a party programme in government, one can of course seek the views of constituents all the time: "How would you like me to vote on this?" However, it fundamentally changes the Burkean principle of having a representative rather than delegatory democracy. I think

[*Simon Hoare*]

our representative democracy, as set out in Burke's famous address to the electors of Bristol, still holds us in pretty good stead.

I do not make this point facetiously: this Chamber is a citizens' assembly in a representative democracy. We have elections to it at some point this year. In a couple of weeks, we will have elections to citizens' assemblies, be they for the mayoralty, for police and crime commissioners or for our local councillors. We talk about the word "democracy", but let us remind ourselves of the history of that word. It comes from the Greek words "demos", meaning people, and "kratos", meaning power—power of the people. We are the citizens' assembly and we can represent the concerns of constituents in a whole variety of ways, through appeals to Ministers, all-party parliamentary groups, debates and the like.

I am all for involving as many people as possible. The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth was absolutely right to highlight the particular need to harness the intellect, enthusiasm and interest of our younger generations, who occasionally—slightly lazily, slightly arrogantly—turn off and turn away: "Oh, they're all corrupt. They're all this, they're all that. Nobody listens." When we ask, "Well, when was the last time you made a representation, asked to see someone, joined a lobby or whatever?", they say, "Oh, I don't bother with any of that."

I say the following as somebody who voted remain in the referendum. After the event, there was a large pro-EU demonstration outside. I fell into conversation with about 20 young people, all of whom were of voting age. Only 10 had voted. The others told me that they had posted stuff on Facebook or put things on Twitter. I then had to point out to them that the returning officer did not count posts on Facebook or posts on Twitter; they counted ballot papers. That is how to effect change.

Conor McGinn: I think my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) posed a legitimate challenge around how, in a systemic way, we can create evidence-based policy based on participatory democracy. I am not convinced that the way to do that lies in citizens' assemblies, but I entirely understand her point.

What I rail against—the Minister touched on this point—is the idea that politicians are not citizens. The Minister spoke about the formalised structure through which we can consult constituents. A good Member of Parliament who is rooted in their community will be doing that every day. I do it while doing everything from taking my kids to football, cricket and rugby to going to mass on a Sunday or the bookies on a Saturday. A good MP will be in touch with his or her community and will consult them all the time. That is a separate point from the one that my hon. Friend made, but it is important that MPs do not allow the perception to take hold that we are all rarefied species detached from people, because it is not true.

Simon Hoare: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We do ourselves no service, as a group of people called to this particular strand of vocational public service, if we try to set ourselves apart like plaster saints who are in some way separate and uncontactable. I agree that we

have to be within our communities. I usually have a citizens' assembly when I drop my kids off at primary school or when I am in the queue at the supermarket or the petrol station: "Hello, Simon! How are you? While I've got you, can I talk to you about this, that and the other?" That is what an engaged Member of Parliament does.

I hear what the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth says, but it is the ballot box that creates the forum for those citizens' assemblies, a representative democracy. We cannot have elections every six months, every year or whatever—as often as we may change our socks or our stance on a particular issue—but that is how this country selects its representatives to take decisions.

One thing I have yet to be convinced about, with regard to the efficacy of citizens' assemblies, is selection through a random postcode lottery, as the hon. Lady set out. They hear evidence from experts; who appoints and defines who these experts are is a moot point, but let us just work on the principle for the moment. They give up a lot of their time, they take evidence, they come to a conclusion, and in coming to that conclusion they will probably find themselves operating in exactly the same way that we do: "I'll give way on that point; you'll give way on this point. We will find a compromise."

It may work once, but I can just imagine somebody saying, "There has been a citizens' assembly in my constituency and they have decided this, and they want me to vote this way or do this thing." That may be a luxury of opposition—something I hope I never get a taste of, but who knows?—or it may come from somebody on the Government Benches. The right hon. Member for Warley is a seasoned former Whip for his party. I am not entirely sure what our Whips offices would say collectively to the idea, but they might well say, "Well that is all fantastically interesting, but the party policy is X. You availed yourself of the benefit of standing for party X, Y or Z, and you will have to follow the Whip."

If we go back to those people who gave their time willingly at a citizens' assembly and say, "I hear exactly what you said, and thank you for all your effort, but you cannot mandate me to do anything. I am perfectly free to do as I will, but my Whips have told me that that freedom is fettered and I have to do this, that or the other," I am not entirely sure that the dynamic of citizens' assemblies would create a self-perpetuating success story. The cold reality of the delivery of governing to choose, or choosing to govern, would hit the slightly abstract, theoretical way in which a citizens' assembly might be run.

John Spellar: The Minister is identifying another part of the problem. First, Governments have to govern broadly and make trade-offs all the time. Secondly, those who attend citizens' assemblies, and spend their weekends and everything else, are almost by definition not representative in the sense that we are. What makes us representative is that we are elected, but that does not make us normal in that sense. What it means is that ordinary citizens have other priorities, which is a very good and sensible thing. It does not mean that those who are prepared to participate are necessarily representative of the broader public.

Simon Hoare: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I would add that another thing they are not is accountable. We are accountable: we are accountable in

a society with a free press and media, and we are accountable through the ballot box. We can hold surgeries where people come to see us and ask, “Why did you vote for that and against the other?” and so on. It is about not just the representation element, but the accountability.

As somebody who started as a grassroots member of a political party and got involved in politics by joining an action group to save a field at the rear of a cathedral that somebody wanted to convert into a car park, I am hugely in favour of the power of the citizen to get involved and effect change. It is demonstrable and clear, certainly to my mind, because I am a product of it. As MPs, let us facilitate and empower more people. Let us convene more discussions locally to get people involved so that they can see the merits of this place and so that once again, or continually, they can see the House of Commons, their council chamber and other forums where elected people serve as their true, real, legitimate and representative citizens' assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

11.27 am

Sitting suspended.

Human Rights: Consular Services

[DAME CAROLINE DINENAGE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered consular services for cases involving human rights.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline. As many other Members probably do, I have a wee blue laminated badge that says “Free Nazanin”. It was given to me by Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe's husband Richard the first time I met him, during his hunger strike outside the Iranian embassy in London. I keep it in the corner of a mirror in my flat. Originally, it was a daily reminder of Nazanin and the emotional torture that she and her family were being put through. Now, I keep it as a reminder of those who are still enduring imprisonment abroad and having to fight for the right to fair representation and fair trial, which in this country we take for granted.

Jagtar Singh Johal has been arrested and held without trial in India for seven years—seven years in which the Indian Government have presented no evidence to link him to any crime. There have been claims of his having to sign a false confession under torture. Ryan Cornelius was arrested in 2008 and convicted of fraud in the United Arab Emirates. After completing his sentence, he now faces a 20-year extension, decided behind closed doors without legal representation. British-Russian journalist Vladimir Kara-Murza, for his criticism of the regime of Vladimir Putin, was given the longest prison sentence for political activity in Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union: 25 years, in one of the country's harshest prisons.

How can that happen, we ask ourselves? How can it be that British nationals can find themselves without legal representation or recourse to support? It was only in a recent conversation with Richard Ratcliffe that I realised the lengths to which he had to go to ensure that Nazanin got representation. As it stands, there is no legal guarantee that any British citizen will have the right to assistance from the consulate in the country where they are held. There is no process, threshold or mechanism. In other countries, there is: in the United States there is a statutory requirement for the State Department and the President to advocate on behalf of US nationals who are wrongfully detained. They must also endeavour to provide support and resources for the detainee's family, whose advocacy can be crucial in securing release, as we know from the case of Richard and Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe.

Yes, support can be provided, and sometimes it is, but the problem is that that is at the discretion of the consulate. Although the UK ratified the Vienna convention through the Consular Relations Act 1968, so much of it relies on diplomacy, good faith and international relationships—discretion. Surely that is not enough. It is not enough that if any of our constituents find themselves detained abroad, they will have no guarantee that their Government will protect them and their wellbeing, and that the right to protest their innocence or transfer home to this country will be dependent on diplomatic niceties and international relationships.

[Christine Jardine]

Too often, the fair treatment or the eventual release of British citizens detained abroad depends on publicity, on campaigns by the family and on the support and hard work of their MP. Many of us have direct experience of offering such support to our constituents. In my previous career as a journalist, I covered the case of a schoolteacher from the north-east of Scotland whose release from jail in Thailand was secured by the then MP for Gordon, my noble Friend Lord Bruce of Bennachie—it is a long-standing issue. I have already mentioned the efforts on behalf of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, many of which were made by the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq). The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) has worked on behalf of Jagtar Singh Johal; the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) does a power of work as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on deaths abroad, consular services and assistance. But the people they have represented are just a tiny fraction of those affected, and the problem is growing.

Just last year, a Foreign Affairs Committee report recognised the scale of the problem. It is a problem that the Government are familiar with, not just through the high-profile cases that I mentioned earlier, but through the 5,000 new cases of British citizens arrested or detained abroad that the Foreign Office estimated in 2022 that it can deal with annually.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The hon. Lady is making an incredibly powerful and well-informed speech; I congratulate her on bringing the issue to Westminster Hall. Is she aware that 10 years ago the Foreign Affairs Committee produced a report on consular assistance that said that the level of support did not meet public expectation and that there were huge gaps? Does she think that things have changed since then?

Christine Jardine: Unfortunately, if things have changed they have got worse. The public have become disillusioned, in a way, and are beginning to think that nothing will ever be done to improve the situation. Everyone who is affected is currently dependent on discretion as to whether their human rights will be protected in the way that we might all expect, and that the public have a right to expect whenever they go abroad. The responsibility falls on families to lobby MPs, the media and even the public to raise awareness of cases and ensure support.

It is vital to stress that none of what I am saying is meant as a criticism of existing consular services—quite the opposite. I hope that we can put on the record our support for the hard work that our consular staff do across the world. We also need to push the Government to recognise that more needs to be done. I believe that it is necessary to strengthen the powers and responsibilities of embassies and consulates around the world to help those in need and provide an automatic response. The fact that that does not exist just now means that the response of the authorities, if it happens at all, is slower than it would ideally be.

We need to overcome the inconsistent level of support across the globe by establishing a clear process to be followed. To that end, my private Member's Bill—the Consular Assistance Bill, which is due a Second Reading on 26 April—would impose a new obligation on UK

Government Ministers to inform consular officials if they have reasonable grounds to believe that there is a risk of a British citizen suffering an abuse of their human rights. It would have to be investigated, and consulates would have to inform the Government and relevant authorities. The person detained would be protected and would then be subject to more intensive and comprehensive investigations by the consulate, which would then have to inform the heads of mission and Ministers of any developments. Visits, discussions or deteriorations in circumstances would also have to be reported. Family or designated persons would have to be informed.

There would also be enhanced responsibilities towards detainees. It would be the duty of the consulate to take reasonable steps to secure the safety and support of the person detained, with visits, food, water, reading and writing materials and, if necessary, medical supplies. Is it not astonishing to be discussing even the possibility that any British citizen detained abroad would not have those things?

For the most serious cases, the consulate would have to ensure access to the correct legal advice and support. We should not forget that in some cases individuals may be the hostage of another state, may have been detained arbitrarily or may even face a possible death sentence. It should be the Secretary of State's responsibility to bring forward the processes that I have mentioned.

I stress again that none of this is meant as a criticism of existing consular services. Quite the opposite: I would like to give consular services the tools to protect British citizens in the way that we and they would surely wish. To that end, I would like to assure the Government of what I am not suggesting. I am not suggesting giving a blanket right to consular assistance in all cases, nor am I suggesting forcing the UK Government to act in every case. My suggestion is specifically to improve the responses for British citizens in extreme or severe cases in which their human rights are at risk or denied. For routine cases such as the loss of a passport or other minor issues, the provision of services will, I hope, remain at the discretion of the consulate.

Of course there is a balance to be struck between personal responsibility and Government support in extreme circumstances, but human rights abuses such as arbitrary detention, torture and inhumane treatment need to be addressed specifically. We should not forget the cases of those who are in detention across the globe just now. I would like to mention the work that Richard Ratcliffe has done to draw attention to the issue—he opened my eyes to what is needed—and the work of charities such as Redress. Their concern, like mine and many other people's, is to ensure that citizens have the assurance that they deserve: that in the most extreme cases and in the most desperate circumstances in which they might find themselves abroad, their Government will be there for them.

2.40 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Dame Caroline. I commend the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) for setting the scene so well. She has been a spokesperson for those in difficulties and always outlines those cases. Perhaps her journalistic history has given her a flavour

for those things. It does not matter—the main thing is that the hon. Lady presents the case very well and I am pleased to support her.

Why is this issue so important for me? It is as important to me as it is to the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), when it comes to issues of human rights and freedom of religious belief and the necessity of consular services being involved. I chair the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief and have spoken on the subject many times.

I see that the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) is here to speak on behalf of those detained in Hong Kong, who have their human rights and religious beliefs restricted, and who are in prison even though they are British passport holders. Jimmy Lai is one who comes to mind. We had a Westminster Hall debate when each of us who participated specifically outlined the case for that gentleman. I will speak for him again today, as I know the right hon. Gentleman will.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) on obtaining this debate. I do not intend to speak; I just want to make a couple of quick points.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) will recall, one problem we discovered with the Jimmy Lai case is that until literally the past few weeks, the Government refused to accept that Jimmy Lai was a British citizen, even though he had never held a Chinese passport, and they adopted the Chinese Government's position that he was a dual national, which he was not. That meant that our Government did not claim consular access rights to a British citizen, which was a pretty appalling state of affairs. We did have those debates—therefore, yes to British citizen; but does the hon. Gentleman agree that the British Government must first always stand by those who believe and have the right documents to say that they are British citizens?

Jim Shannon: I certainly do, and I am pleased that the right hon. Gentleman intervened to underline that issue. I was going to mention Jimmy Lai; the key issue is that he is a British passport holder and does not hold a Chinese passport. He deserves and should get the consular assistance that all British citizens would get, including any one of us who holds a British passport.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh West referred to Richard and Nazanin Ratcliffe, whose MP used to come to speak at Westminster Hall; I cannot recall her constituency, though I used to support her every time. There was great joy when the British Government and others were able to gain Nazanin's freedom and bring her home. I saw a lovely wee story about her in the press last week, as she tries to adjust again to normal life, which could never be easy after all the trauma and the separation from her husband and child.

As an MP who has had many constituents needing help from consulates, I was not surprised to see the level of consular assistance granted to people each year. In any given year, we support 20,000 to 25,000 British nationals and their families, including almost 7,000 detained or arrested abroad. There are occasions whenever we have to intervene or approach the consulate to ask for help. I am not saying it is always the case, but those

who contacted me were either guilty of a minor misdemeanour or were unfortunately targets for untrue allegations.

Some 4,500 people from here die abroad each year. I think of one in particular, although I can think of three or four. I cannot remember what it is called, but I commend the organisation that we have back home in Northern Ireland—I think it is in the UK as well. If someone dies abroad, it supports the family with financial help to try to get the deceased back home. That is such a key role to play for families who grieve and do not know what to do next. That organisation has been very helpful.

Hannah Bardell: I might be able to help the hon. Gentleman. I think the organisation he refers to is the Kevin Bell Repatriation Trust. Kevin Bell was killed abroad and his family set up a trust. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that although the trust does fantastic work, bereaved families should not have to set up trusts to make sure that people get their basic human rights?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for reminding me. I could remember the name Kevin but not his last name—my apologies. I thank the hon. Lady for filling in the gaps in my memory. She is absolutely right: it should not be down to trusts to fill the gap. That particular trust has done excellent work in Northern Ireland and in the Republic as well. Its generosity, commitment and work have been instrumental in bringing people home to their families.

I remember one case very well; it was just before the 2017 election. A constituent came to the office and told me that his son had died due to an accident—he was found drowned in the pool. My constituent did not know what to do. To be honest, I was not sure, either, as an MP. The first thing I did was contact the consulate and it organised the whole thing. Although the Kevin Bell trust does great work, on that occasion the consulate did the work and brought the son home so that he was reunited with his family. I got to see at first hand the pain that his dad and the whole family went through because of what had happened. The son was away from home and the family had not had a chance to say their cheerios, because thousands of miles and an ocean separated them—but the consulate stepped in and helped. I put that on the record and thank the consulate.

Some 1,600 people are victims of crime abroad. I have had a few cases where people have been robbed and found themselves in difficulties; they have lost passports, money, cheque books and cards. In desperation and not knowing what to do, again the consulate has stepped in.

I reiterate the point made by the hon. Member for Edinburgh West when she set the scene: we thank the consulates and their staff for all that they do. We cannot take away from the role that they play. As an elected representative, we always outline cases when things have fallen down. That is the nature of life. Why do people come to us as elected representatives? Because of a problem. They do not necessarily come to say, "You're a good guy. Well done. Thank you very much." They come to tell us about their problems. That is not a criticism, but an observation. I am very happy when they do it. I know others feel the same, because it is our job and we do it with compassion, understanding and a wish to do so.

[*Jim Shannon*]

In any given year, some 5,000 need welfare support and 4,000 are hospitalised abroad. We have had occasions when people have had an accident—they fell and broke their leg, or perhaps had concussion or spent a few days in hospital, and may not have had medical insurance. Sometimes that happens; it is just the nature of people's lives. These are the problems we have to deal with. More often than not, when we seek support, it comes through the consular services.

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office annual report of 2023 highlights that in the last three months of the financial year, consular teams responded to—my goodness—some 114,000 inquiries; 5,000 new assistance cases, which was an increase of 29% from the same period in 2021-22, with over 1,700 of them considered to be vulnerable; and over 6,700 applications for emergency travel documents from those who had lost their passports or travel documents and were panicking about what to do next.

I make this plea for the freedom of religious belief; that is the point I want to make to the Minister. I am pleased to see him in his place, by the way. He is a gentleman and a Minister whom I admire greatly. He understands these issues because he shares the passion that I and others have for freedom of religious belief. I know that he wishes to have a positive response for all those people across the world who are subjected to freedom of religious belief and human rights issues, as the hon. Member for Edinburgh West referred to.

As Members are aware, some of the hardest working non-governmental organisation aid workers in foreign countries are missionaries working through churches. I support a number of them and can well remember the difficulties—I am long enough in the tooth to go back a few years, perhaps more than others in the Chamber—that missionaries had in Zimbabwe, and what was then Rhodesia during the unrest, which put some of them in a very vulnerable position.

I will put this on record because I always think it is only right that if people do things right, we should tell them, and if they do things wrong, we should also tell them that. That is our job in this debate. When missionaries from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland had to be evacuated from Rhodesia at that time, and Zimbabwe as it was a few years after that, they were able to get support not simply from their missionary organisations but from the British consulate. How proud I am to be a member of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Sorry, I am not being smart to my colleagues from Scotland when I say that; I mean it as a personal thing. How proud I am to have a British passport, which I have carried all my life. Some people ask whether I ever think about getting an Irish passport. No, I do not. My passport will always be British. I will comment more on that in a few minutes.

The British consulate got the missionaries safely over the border and to where they needed to be, which was incredibly important to those NGOs. That support was vital for missionary families at a very difficult time, and it is imperative that we have the necessary support in place for those who are under threat due to their religion and belief. Unfortunately, there are more cases of that happening. I think the world has become more radical. People have become more fixated on their views, whether

they be on the right or on the left. The understanding that I and others in the Chamber have in our hearts is something that we wish to see, but we do not see it very often.

As a Member, I have the ability to verify both British and Irish passport applications, which I do back home in my office every week. I cannot believe how many passports I verify, and I am happy to do it for those in my constituency who identify as British, Irish or indeed both. For those who are lured by the ability to skip the queue in immigration on their Spanish holiday by perhaps having a different passport, I always urge them to retain their British passport and identity. It is really important that we do that. There is a reason for it, which is why I encourage people to do so: we have many more consulates in place and therefore much more support. That support is essential for foreign travel, especially to places with limited help for foreign nationals.

I have said it before and I will say it again: I am someone who is proud to be British and carry a British passport, knowing that I will be protected and that my family will as well. I see the protections and benefits that come with carrying a British passport, and it is with real pride that I carry it and show it to others. I have help should I need it, and we need to ensure that British citizens across the world hold the assurance that there is always an avenue for help. There is always a British consulate that is willing to help. That is even more important in those countries whose Governments do not have the same human rights duty that we take for granted here. That is the thrust of the argument made by the hon. Member for Edinburgh West, and it is why we are here in Westminster Hall today.

We look to the Minister for a response. We also look to the shadow spokespeople in both the SNP and the Labour party. I very much look forward to hearing all their contributions.

I go back to the words of my friend the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green. We have talked about Hong Kong and China's imprisonment of people who dare to speak out against those regimes. That includes Jimmy Lai, a man I have never met but who I have read about, and I know that the right hon. Gentleman has been very active on his behalf. Jimmy Lai's passport and his access to the help it implies means something, or at least it should, and the fact that it has not until now disappoints me. In the light of the intervention by the right hon. Gentleman and my own request, will the Minister therefore update us on where we are with Jimmy Lai?

Retaining consulates in China is vital for cases such as this, but that really only works if we can see it working, and we have not until now. I hope the Minister can give us some encouragement on that in his response to us. I urge the Government to prioritise access to consulates for all our constituents throughout the world. I know that the Minister is committed to that, but it only ever works when we see it in action. Until now, we have not seen action when it comes to Jimmy Lai, but we hope that we will shortly.

Dame Caroline, it is always a pleasure to serve under your chairship. I very much look forward to hearing what my colleague and friend the hon. Member for Glasgow North will say shortly and also to what others will say.

2.56 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Caroline, especially at relatively short notice. I say to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that when Scotland becomes an independent country, I am sure he will have more than sufficient heritage to apply for a Scottish passport, which he can proudly hold alongside his UK passport.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) on securing this debate and on her efforts to champion this issue, because the adequacy—or otherwise—of consular assistance, particularly in difficult circumstances, has been of concern to many of us and to our constituents in recent years. We have heard particularly about the incarceration of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, and I suspect that all of us received significant correspondence from constituents standing in solidarity with her and her family during the years of her imprisonment. I think of the debate that was held here in Westminster Hall in November 2021, which was one of the busiest I have ever taken part in. There were dozens and dozens of Members—far too many for them all to be able to speak in the time allowed.

However, in addition to high-profile cases with national significance, many of us will have dealt with the circumstances of other individuals, and we have heard examples today. In September 2017, I held an Adjournment debate in the main Chamber on consular assistance and support for people caught up in terrorist atrocities and particularly for witnesses. Constituents came to see me about terrorist attacks in Stockholm and Tunisia, and although they were fortunate in the sense that they had not been directly injured or bereaved, they had been witnesses to those attacks, which in itself was an incredibly traumatic experience. Regrettably, support was found to be lacking—both immediate assistance and longer-term follow-up—and has not always lived up to people's expectations, which was a key point that the hon. Member for Edinburgh West made.

A lot of people look at their passport, at what is said on the FCDO's website or perhaps at the experiences of citizens of other countries, and they expect a level of service that does not necessarily always manifest itself. I echo the hon. Member in saying that that is not a criticism of existing staff and the services that they attempt to provide. Many of them are doing a very impressive job in what are sometimes very difficult circumstances. That is partly a legacy of the austerity agenda, from which the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, as it was, was not immune—in fact, it was perhaps seen as low-hanging fruit. What was once a Rolls-Royce Department was chipped and shaved away at, like so many other Departments, and its more limited staffing base is under increasing pressure. The Minister may disagree, but that is the experience that many of us have heard from our constituents. There is a growing divergence between what people expect to be entitled to and what the level of service sometimes turns out to be. We have heard examples of that: Nazanin in Iran has already been mentioned, but there are also Mehran Raouf in Iran—a dual citizen—Jimmy Lai and Jagtar Singh Johal, championed so worthily by my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes).

There is therefore considerable merit in the private Member's Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Edinburgh West, and I hope the Government find a way

to make time for it to progress. Important recommendations have been made in reports and other documents published by the all-party parliamentary group on deaths abroad, consular services and assistance, which my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) ably chairs. Like others, I acknowledge the important work of Redress, Amnesty International and others, which have supported those initiatives as they have gone through Parliament. I am particularly grateful for the work of Death Abroad—You're Not Alone, run by my constituent Julie Love, who champions people who have lost a loved one overseas and who seek justice, repatriation or simply care and support.

I hope that the Minister is prepared to engage constructively and to listen to the real-life experiences we are bringing to his attention. I also hope he will consider how best the Government can live up to the expectations that people rightly have, as the hon. Member for Strangford said, because of what is written in the passports that we are all supposed to be so proud to carry around with us. If that has to be put on a statutory footing through the likes of the private Member's Bill that the hon. Member for Edinburgh West is bringing forward, perhaps that is not a bad thing. Perhaps that would allow the FCDO to make the case to the Treasury for more adequate resourcing, for improved training and for more staff and resources to be available to our consular offices around the world. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to contribute briefly, and I look forward to the Minister's response.

3.2 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I start with heartfelt congratulations to the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine): it is wonderful to see another Member taking up this cause so passionately. I pay tribute particularly to Richard and Nazanin; if it were not for the dignified way they raised their voices, this issue would not have come to the attention of all Members from across the House. However, it should not be that he or she who shouts the loudest gets the most attention. I spoke to Richard when my team and I were writing our report for the all-party parliamentary group on deaths abroad, consular services and assistance, which I chair, and he said that himself, as did many families who gave evidence to us. I commend the hon. Lady's Bill, and I agree with everything in it. The only point I would make—this is not a criticism—is that I want it to go further and to be expanded upon, and I will tell Members why shortly.

On the inside page of our passports—I appreciate that mine might be out of date, for obvious reasons—it says:

“Her Britannic Majesty's Secretary of State requests and requires in the name of Her Majesty all those whom it may concern to allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance and to afford the bearer such assistance and protection as may be necessary.”

That is what it says on our British passports, and it is what our citizens rightly expect to get for being British citizens, whether they are singularly British citizens or dual nationals. That is the point that we all need to start from. The general public have a reasonable expectation that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office will help us, and will help our family members if we are killed, if we die or if we get into trouble and something goes wrong when we are abroad. They expect the level of service we get to be akin to that which we would get if we get into trouble here in our own country.

[*Hannah Bardell*]

My comments come from some personal experience. Having worked for the American State Department as a local staffer in a consulate for a couple of years before I came to this place, I saw at first hand the level of assistance afforded by the American state. There are a lot of things we can criticise America for, but its consular assistance is not one of them. I saw at first hand how, when a family had lost a loved one in Scotland—they were an American citizen—how the consul general, who was my boss, phoned the family up personally, spoke to them, went to the airport to meet them, liaised with local police services, and made sure the family were kept up to date.

It is not a criticism of our consular services that they do not do that, and I know that, in some cases, they do. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) and the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Edinburgh West all recognise, we should pay tribute to consular staff, but the reality is they are doing their jobs with one hand tied behind their back. That is partly because of Brexit and partly because of austerity, but they have been to cut to the bone.

When I visited the embassy in Madrid a number of years ago to raise concerns on behalf of my constituent Kirsty Maxwell, who was killed in Benidorm, and I talked to the staff and the ambassador about the proposals in our report, they could not have been more supportive. They recognised that the human rights of our citizens were not being fully adhered to and supported, because staff were not able to provide the service that they would like. That is a particularly important point to make.

We have heard of a number of cases of human rights abuse in this debate, and we must include Alaa Abd El-Fattah—the British-Egyptian dual national who was denied British consular support—Jimmy Lai, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and, of course, Jagtar Singh Johal. What the families of those people have been through is unimaginable, and so too is the experience of the families of those who are killed abroad.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North mentioned Death Abroad—You're Not Alone, or DAYNA. His constituent Julie Love set that charity up after her son died abroad in suspicious circumstances. Eve Henderson set up Murdered Abroad when her husband was killed in France. The Kevin Bell Repatriation Trust was set up for similar reasons, and the parents of Tom Channon—John and Ceri Channon—set up a charity to raise awareness after their son died in Magaluf.

My constituents Brian and Denise Curry have campaigned relentlessly after their daughter was killed on holiday in Benidorm. She and her husband Adam were married just a few months before she died. It was an utterly tragic case. My constituent Julie Pearson was killed after a severe beating by her partner in Eilat in Israel. Despite the local authorities claiming she died of natural causes, we knew differently, and her aunt Deborah, who is my constituent, is one of the most formidable women I have ever encountered.

I dealt with those constituency cases early in my parliamentary career. I did what all MPs do: I stood up, I asked questions, I pressed the Foreign Office—and I got nowhere and got no answers. I knew that there must be more that could be done, which is why we set up the all-party parliamentary group and why we continue to

campaign on this issue. Families whose loved ones die abroad, are incarcerated or have their human rights violated need that support.

The Bill proposed by the hon. Member for Edinburgh West is particularly interesting because it has certain limitations on it. I would argue that if we had an absolute right to consular assistance, and that assistance was provided early on, whatever the circumstances, people's rights would not be violated. That would ensure that people get the support that they need.

The reality is that since Brexit, there has been a scramble for trade deals. Human rights are—in the eyes of some—going out the window and being traded off against trade deals. That, for me, is fundamentally unacceptable. I recognise the pride of the hon. Member for Strangford in being British—I do not identify with it, but I understand it—but he and others surely understand that the positive notion of being British is being undermined. The notion of a global Britain, when our services and institutions are chipped away at, actually undermines the positive case for the British identity.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North said, and I could not agree more, when Scotland is an independent nation we will devise and develop an international diplomacy service—I hope it will be called that and not a Foreign Office—that will have consular affairs, consular assistance and human rights absolutely at its heart, not because we want to be different, but because it is the right thing to do. The Bill proposed by the hon. Member for Edinburgh West goes a long way towards establishing those principles.

The contributions that people have made have been incredibly powerful, but how many more times will we have to stand up and represent constituents whose loved one has died in tragic circumstances, or constituents whose loved one is incarcerated somewhere and who cannot even get an officer there to support them, because the officer does not have the ability, the support or the resource? I have no doubt—when we took evidence from those who were caught up in terrorist attacks, there was a recognition of this—that there is a standard of service provided to our citizens if their loved one is killed in a terrorist attack. They get translation of documents and support for repatriation, so we know that the FCDO can do this.

Some 4,500 UK citizens die abroad each year; a very small fraction of those deaths are in suspicious circumstances. Surely the very essence of being a proud nation, however you identify, is that you look after those who are the most vulnerable and those who get into trouble. The reality for so many families is that they have to fundraise to get their loved ones home—either because they did not understand the nature of the insurance they had taken out, or because the insurance was not adequate.

I plead with the Minister to seriously consider the hon. Lady's Bill, but also to look carefully at the resource that his own staff need, because taking a trauma-informed approach is crucial. We have spoken to so many families who have been traumatised, and also to staff who have worked in consulates and have dealt with traumatic situations. It is absolutely crucial, so I hope he will hear the cries from the Benches across the House and from Members who have had to represent constituents who

have got into terrible situations. At the very least, these constituents deserve to have their human rights and their dignity respected.

3.12 pm

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Caroline. I thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) for securing this important debate, and I thank colleagues for such a good and wide-ranging debate. We have heard some powerful speeches today, not least from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on freedom of religious belief, and from other Members with personal stories about why these consular services must be strengthened.

The Labour party firmly believes that the protection of British citizens should be central to our foreign policy. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on that today. Consular assistance is a core function of the FCDO and a vital tool to respond to a spectrum of situations affecting British citizens overseas, including serious human rights abuses. For any British national, the idea of being wrongly detained overseas or denied due legal process is the stuff of nightmares. Kept away from friends and family, dealing with foreign laws and customs, subject in some cases to arbitrary processes with an uncertain outcome—that is a situation that none of us would want for any of our loved ones.

I know that Foreign Office consular officials regularly go above and beyond to provide reassurance and support to British nationals who get into difficulty, but there have been several high-profile cases—we have heard of some today—of FCDO Ministers receiving criticism from families and the media for failing to secure timely release of British citizens detained abroad. No one doubts the difficulty of these cases, but too often the Government's efforts to secure the release of nationals unjustly detained abroad have been, according to the families themselves, arbitrary, haphazard, unco-ordinated and lacking resource and transparency.

Members right across the House will know the harrowing case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, the British-Iranian citizen detained in Iran for six years on false spying charges. She and her husband Richard, who campaigned tirelessly for her release, have been articulate critics and advocates for change. It was here, in this very room, just a few years ago that I, along with many of my colleagues in the House, spoke so passionately about the need for the FCDO and the Government to do more to secure her release. I remember speaking to her directly, knowing that she could hear the speeches here, and saying that she must believe her release would one day come.

Today, I want to raise the issues facing some of those who remain unfairly detained abroad. Alaa Abd El-Fattah is a human rights activist who spent almost a decade in prison in Egypt. Alaa is a British and Egyptian citizen, a courageous voice for democracy and a prisoner of conscience. The UK Government have not managed to gain consular access to him in prison.

Mehran Raoof is an activist currently in Iran held under arbitrary detention at Tehran's Evin prison after being arrested by agents of the revolutionary guards in 2020. He is enduring prolonged solitary confinement, contravening the prohibition of torture.

For Jagtar Singh Johal, it is over 2,000 days since he was detained in India, and the current Foreign Secretary is the sixth to be in post since his arrest. Jagtar's family and representatives are exhausted by having to start all over again when a new Foreign Secretary is appointed.

As others have mentioned, Jimmy Lai has been detained in Hong Kong for pro-democracy protests and accusations of endangering national security. If convicted, he faces life in prison.

Vladimir Kara-Murza is held in Russia for denouncing Russia's invasion of Ukraine. His declining health while being held in harsh conditions in Siberia and moved around from prison to prison is of huge concern. I could go on.

There are so many others, though, who do not share the high profile of those five and who go under the radar. Families of those victims have called upon this Government for support, and promises have been made to them that they are yet to see. Can the Minister confirm whether the Foreign Secretary has met with the families of any of those I have mentioned here today? If so, which ones?

The Vienna convention on consular relations recognises the vulnerability of foreign nationals facing prosecution and imprisonment abroad. A country that is party to the convention has a legal duty to provide the UK with access to its detained citizens, including the right of consular officers to visit and assist detained nationals. However, there is no corresponding legal obligation for the UK Government to provide consular assistance to a UK citizen, even in cases involving allegations of torture or arbitrary detention. At present, consular support for British citizens abroad is entirely at the discretion of the Foreign Office and Government Ministers.

Does the Minister agree that a right as basic as consular assistance should not be based on the generosity or discretion of a particular Minister or civil servants? I believe that most of our constituents would be very surprised to learn that they do not have that right already. It is a fundamental duty of Government, and it is what citizens should rightly expect. That is why the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), has made two pledges.

First, a Labour Government will seek to legislate for a new right to consular assistance. Putting that on a statutory footing will help raise consistent standards in consular assistance while sending a clear message to other countries that the UK will always raise cases of poor or unfair treatment of its citizens, particularly where we are dealing with cases involving allegations of serious human rights abuses. I welcome the ideas raised in this debate about how that could be delivered.

Secondly, we would appoint a special envoy for Britons wrongly detained abroad. That would strengthen the capacity of Government to work on the cases of those wrongfully detained. It would provide a single point of contact for affected families. It would also help to strengthen efforts with allies and partners to challenge and deter the worrying rise in the use of arbitrary detention as a tool of foreign policy.

I believe that these two proposals together can make a real difference. It remains the first and foremost duty of a Government to keep their citizens safe. A Labour Government will always take that duty seriously.

3.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley):

It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Dame Caroline. I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) on securing the debate, and I commend her strong interest in supporting British nationals abroad. I note her work on the private Member's Bill, which is also related to consular services, and will seek to address some of the concerns that she and others have raised. I reply as the Minister responsible for consular policy. I am grateful for the contributions of other hon. Members and acknowledge the strength of feeling on this important topic, both in the room and across the House more widely.

Let me begin by providing a brief overview of our consular services in human rights cases before moving on to details on some of the individual issues raised and some of the individual cases, which are important. A number of hon. Members raised points and concerns, including the hon. Members for Edinburgh West, for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin), for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) and for Livingston (Hannah Bardell). When we are talking about consular services, it is really important to highlight that these are genuinely complex cases—everybody recognises that—and, as a result, they are not simple. I review our complex cases very regularly, as do other Ministers; they are extraordinarily challenging.

I note gently to the hon. Member for Glasgow North, who I respect enormously on this subject, that we are now living in a world in which there is an increasing number of challenging and complex situations, and that makes this all the more challenging. We can have a debate about resources, but there is also a debate to be had about the demand and the challenges of the world that we are currently living in, which no doubt will be a debate that we continue to work through.

As others have done, I thank the amazing work of our consular officers and their extraordinary and dedicated service, particularly in some extraordinarily challenging situations. Our support for British nationals in difficulty overseas is right at the heart of the work of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Our staff are contactable 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and they offer empathetic, professional advice, tailored to each individual case. In the last 12 months, consular staff opened over 3,000 new arrest and detention cases and are currently providing assistance in over 1,800 cases. Detainees' welfare and human rights are our top priorities. Our support can include seeking consular access, monitoring prisoners' welfare and helping them gain access to local justice processes. We provide tailored information for each country on the local prison and judicial systems for detained British nationals about what to expect, and we also raise specific consular cases with foreign authorities and support the families of those who are detained. We will come on to some of those cases in just a minute.

We take allegations of torture and mistreatment incredibly seriously. When we receive such an allegation, we will consider approaching local authorities to support the welfare of the person affected, such as by lobbying for them to receive medical treatment or be moved to a different facility. Our approach is informed by our specialist human rights advisers, who provide expertise on human rights concerns and every allegation of torture and mistreatment. Where we hear of an allegation over

the phone or from a third party, we prioritise actually visiting the detainee to check on them and, where safe to do so, ask about the allegation.

We are not able to carry out investigations in other countries. However, we can and do raise allegations of torture and mistreatment with local authorities, requesting an effective investigation as required under international human rights law where we have the consent of the individual to do so.

Last year, the FCDO received 189 new allegations of torture and mistreatment from British nationals overseas. Each year, our human rights advisers conduct a review of all such cases to identify trends and develop strategies to engage with relevant countries. For transparency, we publish consular data on torture and mistreatment as part of our annual human rights report. The Government take a taskforce approach to the most serious and complex cases. That ensures that we harness the right expertise across the FCDO and across Government, and the appropriate senior engagement to drive progress. My ministerial colleagues and I are consulted from the outset, receive regular updates on the cases and are involved throughout.

Arbitrary detention has also been raised. The UK deplores and condemns the practice in all circumstances; it is a clear breach of human rights and is contrary to international law. The FCDO is not a fact-finding or judicial body and is therefore not best placed to determine whether an individual's circumstances could amount to arbitrary detention. Nevertheless, where the United Nations says that is the case or where there is supporting evidence, our expert advisers will form an assessment based on all available information, which will be put to Ministers to decide our approach.

We will never accept our nationals being detained as a means of diplomatic leverage and we are determined to combat the practice. In the very rare instances in which that is the case, a senior official such as that country's director will lead case handling until the person is released. In that way, we have secured the release of British nationals across the globe, including in Iran, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Myanmar and Libya. We also work with like-minded states—for example, Canada—to end the use of arbitrary detention, to support those who have been arbitrarily detained and to demand accountability.

In all that, our ability to support British nationals overseas depends on the co-operation of the state in question. The UK is a party to the Vienna convention on consular relations, which is clear that we cannot interfere in foreign legal processes, with the detaining authority having jurisdiction over British nationals. The convention provides for consular visits to British detainees but is silent on dual nationality. Many states interpret that as meaning that it does not cover dual nationals in their other home country, which is a complicating factor, as many colleagues are aware. Where we have human rights concerns, we will also lobby to have access to detained British dual nationals. However, the host state's national law and interpretation of the convention are key in determining whether we are able to gain consular access. That frequently hampers our efforts to support dual nationals, especially in cases that are politicised.

Before coming on to cases, it is important to note that in carrying out this important and complex work, we collaborate closely with partners who provide specialist support. Some of them have already been mentioned in

the debate. The charity Prisoners Abroad does wonderful work to support British nationals detained abroad, to help their families and, on their release, to help them settle back into the United Kingdom. In cases where British and dual nationals face the death penalty, our partners Reprieve and the Death Penalty Project can offer support. We are assisting 10 British people sentenced to death around the world. We do all we can to prevent the execution of British nationals and we continue to campaign for capital punishment to be abolished.

A number of sensitive and challenging cases were raised at the start by the hon. Member for Edinburgh West, including that of Jagtar Singh Johal, which other speakers also mentioned. We have consistently raised our concerns about Mr Johal's case directly with the Government of India, including his allegations regarding torture and mistreatment and his right to a fair trial. The Foreign Secretary met Mr Johal's brother and the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) on 12 February. The Foreign Secretary is currently reviewing our approach to Mr Johal's case, which he discussed with Mr Johal's brother and the hon. Member when they met. Mr Johal's family and hon. Members will be updated when that review is complete. Our approach will always be guided by our assessment of Mr Johal's best interests.

The hon. Members for Edinburgh West and for Cardiff North mentioned the very sensitive case of Vladimir Kara-Murza. The politically motivated conviction of Mr Kara-Murza is absolutely deplorable. To answer some of the questions put by the hon. Member for Cardiff North, the Foreign Secretary met Mr Kara-Murza's wife and mother on 1 March, and our officials continue to support his family.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I am concerned, because rather than run away, Kara-Murza went back to Russia to make the case against the brutality of the war on Ukraine, rather like Jimmy Lai did in his case. He is now incarcerated on trumped-up charges, which we have known for a long time. He is very ill, and his likely death is very much at the forefront of our mind because of the murder of Navalny when he became the main target. To that end, I note that the Minister's predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), said that

"we do not and would not countenance a policy of prisoner swaps."—[*Official Report*, 19 February 2024; Vol. 745, c. 495.]

I ask the Minister to review that, because I do not think it is correct. That process has been used to obtain the release of British citizens in the past, including Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, and, I remind him, Natan Sharansky and Vladimir Bukovsky during the Soviet period. I am concerned that it will come down to that, as the only method we have available. He may not survive long if we do not do something about it. I would be grateful if the Minister took that away and asked his officials whether we will engage on this, if necessary, with a prisoner swap.

David Rutley: I understand my right hon. Friend's point. I have always enjoyed his contributions, which are very thoughtful. I respect him enormously, having been his Parliamentary Private Secretary for more than a year. I can say that, as a result of what has happened to Mr Kara-Murza, the Foreign, Commonwealth and

Development Office sanctioned 11 individuals in response to his sentencing and appeal, as well as two individuals involved with his earlier poisoning. I understand the points my right hon. Friend makes; I think he understands that we do not normally engage in prisoner swaps, and they are not part of our policy, but I will take his points away and talk to officials.

Other hon. Members have mentioned the case of Mr Alaa Abd El-Fattah. We remain committed to securing consular access and release for this dual British-Egyptian national and human rights defender. The Foreign Secretary and Lord Ahmad have met family members, most recently on 20 December 2023. I hope that hon. Members can see that these sensitive cases that have been raised are being tackled and engaged in at the highest level in the FCDO.

That brings me to the Jimmy Lai case, which has been mentioned by many hon. Members including the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith). Mr Lai's prosecution is highly politicised, and the Foreign Secretary recently reiterated his call for Mr Lai's release with Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Munich security conference on 16 February. There has been some debate about Mr Lai's citizenship. He is a British citizen but Chinese nationality laws are clear: China considers anyone born in Hong Kong to be a Chinese national. They do not recognise dual nationality, as I highlighted earlier in my remarks. Hong Kong authorities therefore consider Mr Lai to be a Chinese national.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Will the Minister give way?

David Rutley: In one second, because I have not quite finished. We have not been granted consular access. The UK Government are equally clear that Mr Lai is a British citizen and we continue to request consular access.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, but I have to ask why it took so long for the British Government to claim him as a British citizen. The Chinese position is hypocrisy, because not that long ago the Chinese authorities did not recognise someone who was in Hong Kong as a Chinese citizen. They reversed that only a few years ago, to claim them if they were born in China as Chinese nationals or dual nationals, which they then did not respect.

The problem is that the Foreign Office has got itself into a complete mess over Jimmy Lai, and it must never do that again. We should stand clearly on the basis that we recognise British citizenship and the individual's passport. It is not for us to allow ourselves to repeat what the other nation says, in this case China, which is a disputed position from start to finish. Why we got into that, I have no idea at all.

David Rutley: I thank my right hon. Gentleman for his comments, but I would like to restate that the Foreign Secretary reiterated his call for Mr Lai's release on 16 February. That is the Government's policy. I think my right hon. Friend is pleased that that is the stance and that we continue to push for access to him.

I would like to respond briefly to the point from the hon. Member for Strangford about freedom of religion or belief. He and my hon. Friend the Member

[David Rutley]

for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) are the two champions of this vital human right. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for raising it repeatedly and in most debates of this nature. We are committed to defending freedom of religion or belief for all and promoting respect between different religious and non-religious communities. With all the many other rights we have that we obviously need to uphold and support, we must not lose sight of the importance of religion to so many people in this world and how much it means to them. We must respect that. The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that we continue to hold close this important human right. Most recently I have been focusing on the appalling human rights abuses around freedom of religion or belief in Nicaragua. I know that is an area he feels very strongly about too.

I should also mention the important case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, which has been raised by a number of Members, including the hon. Member for Edinburgh West at the start of her powerful speech. Nazanin, her husband Richard and their family were put through unimaginable torment by the Iranian authorities, and we are glad that that is over. FCDO officials and Ministers worked tirelessly to secure the release and return of Nazanin and other detainees from Iran. The Foreign Secretary met Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Richard Ratcliffe on 15 March.

We should recognise that the Foreign Affairs Committee has issued a report and a follow-up report on what it calls “combating state hostage taking”. We do not recognise that term. However, the Foreign Secretary has fully read the FAC follow-up report and informed the Committee during his appearance before it on 9 January that he is taking more time to fully consider the recommendations before responding in full. These are important issues that require a lot of thought, and we need to pull our actions together.

It is vital to highlight that lessons have been learned from these cases, and we continue to learn as we deal with very challenging circumstances. Following the publication of the Committee’s initial report and having consulted with external trauma experts, FCDO has formalised arrangements to ensure that ongoing psychosocial support is made available to returning detainees—something I think the hon. Member for Livingston would approve of. That is very important. They will also have a named point of contact on return to the United Kingdom, and we have reinforced our partnership with Hostage International, so these lessons are being learned.

We heard from the hon. Member for Edinburgh West and the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Cardiff North, about how we can best support British nationals abroad. While we all have that as an aim, the Government have a different view on the case for legislating to support that aim. We believe that a legal right would not change the course and outcome of most complex cases. The Vienna convention on consular relations requires us to provide assistance without interfering in the internal affairs of the host state, so our ability to offer some kind of assistance would continue to remain dependent on co-operation from the host state. A law in the UK would not change that.

Most of our international partners do not offer a legal right to consular assistance to their citizens. That includes our Five Eyes partners: the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Most countries, like us, have discretion in the provision of consular services and have a published policy or charter that sets out what services citizens can expect. There are some exceptions in Europe that have provisions for this legal right—Germany, Sweden and Belgium. It is important to highlight that we are aware of only three of the more than 190 countries in the world that have provisions for some form of legal right, and their laws are specific about the limitations.

Consular assistance is wholly dependent on what the receiving state—the foreign country where the consular services are offered—will allow. Sweden also charges for all consular services and makes having appropriate insurance compulsory. There are some important issues to think through in this area, notwithstanding the fact that we all recognise that consular services are an important way to support British nationals overseas.

I thank all hon. Members for their valuable contributions. We will continue our efforts to support detained British nationals and tailor our approach to specific cases, within the parameters of international law. I thank the families of detainees who help to support their loved ones. I also thank our specialist partners, including Prisoners Abroad, Reprieve and the Death Penalty Project, for their expertise, and the other organisations that hon. Members highlighted. Last but by no means least, I pay tribute to our consular officers, who put huge effort into helping people in the most difficult circumstances. They do important work, and we are very grateful for all that they do.

3.41 pm

Christine Jardine: I thank everybody who has taken part in the debate for making such a concerted and powerful case for change. I fully appreciate what the Minister says about the good work that our embassies and consular services do every day across the world, but it is clear from what right hon. and hon. Members said that more needs to be done. The public in this country need reassurance that if something goes wrong when they are abroad, they will get the help and support they need. I thank the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) for informing us that a new Labour Government would take a different approach and would improve the situation. We will hold her to that if there is a new Labour Government later this year or next year.

I would like the Minister to take this point away and consider it: it is time for change. As the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) said, it has been more than 10 years since the Foreign Affairs Committee report that said that the public expect better than they get at the moment. If we do that, perhaps we can be confident that the service will live up to the promise in our passports of support, help, passage, safety and security wherever we go in the world.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered consular services for cases involving human rights.

3.43 pm

Sitting suspended.

Health Services: Cross-border Co-operation

4 pm

Dame Caroline Dinenage (in the Chair): I will call Virginia Crosbie to move the motion and then I will call the Minister to respond. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, or indeed for anyone else to make a speech, but there will potentially be opportunities to intervene.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered cross-border cooperation on health services.

It is an honour to have you chairing this important debate on cross-border co-operation on the health service, Dame Caroline, and I thank you for the opportunity to hold it.

My constituents in Ynys Môn, like those of my colleagues here today, are served by the devolved Welsh NHS, which is managed and funded by the Welsh Government in Cardiff. Despite health having been devolved for 25 years, around a third of my most serious casework is for my constituents who are suffering, or perhaps even dying, because of failures in our local health board. I hear from patients, families and even members of staff who are deeply concerned about Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board—BCUHB for short—and the effect that its failings are having on the people of north Wales. That is why my colleagues and I want the UK Government to help find a solution and why we desperately need the following: much better co-operation across borders on our health services; data that allows the direct comparison of performance across all health boards in the UK, regardless of whether they are devolved; a recognition that the UK Government have a moral, and arguably a legal, duty to take action where the wellbeing of their citizens is compromised; and a willingness to act on that duty where necessary.

I can best explain why we are so concerned by sharing the issues we face in north Wales. BCUHB is by far the largest health board in Wales; with a budget of £1.9 billion, it is responsible for a quarter of the Welsh population—more than 700,000 people spread across a huge area roughly four times the size of Greater London. BCUHB is currently in Welsh Government special measures for not the first but the second time; it has spent all of the last six years in special measures. Despite that, its performance seems to be getting worse, not better. It has been called “dysfunctional”, “chaotic” and a “basket case”. In February 2023, the Welsh Health Minister sacked its entire board. An audit of its 2021–22 accounts found £122 million unaccounted for, with senior executives accused of deliberately falsifying entries. It is now on its eighth chief executive in 11 years. All that is despite a devolution settlement that funds the Welsh Government with £1.20 per person for every £1 we spend here in England.

It is difficult to relate just how bad some of the stories I hear are: people discharged from hospital sicker than when they went in; hours spent waiting for ambulances, and hours spent waiting in ambulances outside A&E; errors in patient records; appointments lost; significant failures in the provision of medication; palliative patients

dying in hospital because fast-tracking them home would take weeks; and medical appointments cancelled and rearranged for hospitals 60 miles away.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board has, over the last decade, received the 11th highest number of prevention of future death reports of any organisation in England and Wales. To put that in perspective, organisations with comparable numbers of such reports are generally whole United Kingdom Government Departments. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a damning indictment of the poor state of health services in north Wales and further emphasises the serious concerns about the adequacy of those devolved services?

Virginia Crosbie: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, which gives me the opportunity to thank him for his hard work in fighting not only for his constituents, but for everyone across Wales. They deserve a better service than they are getting, and it is only by working together that we can get action, so I am delighted that he is here today. He is a doughty campaigner and a doughty champion for his constituency.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Northern Ireland-Republic of Ireland cross-border initiative was officially closed in December 2020 due to the withdrawal of EU funding. It was a scheme that many of my constituents bought into and did well out of, getting their operations down south before coming back to Northern Ireland, thereby skipping long waiting lists.

The hon. Lady is absolutely right to ask for better cross-border health co-operation between Wales and England, and I understand the reason that she does so, but I believe that there is an argument to be made for a scheme across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, because I think that there are cross-border opportunities that we can all take advantage of. Although she is asking specifically about Wales and England, the title of the debate, if she does not mind my saying so, is “Health Services: Cross-border Co-operation,” and that is something that we can all ask for.

Virginia Crosbie: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, and in particular for that feedback on how cross-border co-operation actually works. Of course I am focusing on Wales, but he quite rightly highlights that this is the United Kingdom. By working together, we can solve these issues and provide a collaborative approach to healthcare for people across the UK.

I also wanted to add to my list of failures the near-collapse of local NHS dental services. I could honestly stand here and reel off story after story of lives drastically and sometimes irreversibly impacted by the failures of BCUHB. In Holyhead, the largest town in my constituency, two GP practices were merged during the pandemic into Hwb Iechyd Cybi, or Cybi Health Hub. That practice has suffered a series of problems, including twice facing the threat of having no GPs—and that is in Holyhead, the largest town in my constituency.

One of the main things that would make a difference to Hwb Iechyd Cybi and the people it serves would be to co-locate the two original practices. Proposals have been made for that and, in the longer term, for a state-of-the-art healthcare centre for Holyhead. The co-location

[*Virginia Crosbie*]

project would deliver economies of scale that would vastly improve the service that the practices can deliver and, therefore, patient outcomes. The project was allegedly given the go-ahead two years ago, but it has stalled and stalled in BCUHB's hands, and now it has completely stagnated. Likewise, the integrated health centre has been under discussion for years, but it remains under discussion, with no progress likely. Lack of funding is the problem that is generally cited.

Hwb Iechyd Cybi serves 9,000 patients, and there are around 15,000 people in its catchment area. Holyhead is not a minor backwater in north Wales; it is a large town, yet it has no integrated healthcare. It has an A&E that is 25 miles away across a bridge that closes in high winds, and it has a massive shortage of doctors. I have launched my own petition to raise awareness of this issue and to call on BCUHB to proceed with the co-location project, as well as starting work on the new health centre with urgency. I recognise that the NHS faces significant pressures across the UK, but people are actually moving out of my constituency to live in other parts of Britain because they are scared of becoming ill in north Wales.

There are too many stories of avoidable death and harm. Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to compare the situation across the devolved nations in order to see just how bad it really is, because the Welsh Government produce different data from that produced by the UK Government. That makes it almost impossible to compare patient outcomes across borders.

What we do know are facts like these. In 2023, over 22,000 paramedic hours were lost in Wales just waiting outside A&E. In January 2024, more than 3,000 people in north Wales waited for more than 12 hours to be discharged from A&E, and nearly 60,000 BCUHB patients had been waiting for more than 36 weeks to start treatment; six years earlier, that number was just under 10,000. Over 57,000 people across Wales have been waiting for more than a year to start treatment, with 24,000 patient pathways waiting more than two years. Since 2010-11, the Welsh Government have increased health spending by 30.6%, well short of the UK Government's increase in England of 38.9%.

We have asked the UK Government for help on behalf of our constituents. Last year, the then Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), wrote to the Welsh Government to offer a right of access to NHS services in England for people in Wales. Unfortunately, the Welsh Health Minister claims not to have the additional budget to facilitate that proposal, despite the clear benefits it could offer our constituents. The Welsh Government can, however, find an estimated £100 million to increase the number of Senedd Members from 60 to 96; £4.25 million to buy a farm that it now cannot develop; and over £30 million to implement the much-derided default 20 mph speed limit.

The Welsh Government approach is also highly inconsistent. Take the covid pandemic. The Welsh Government seemed to be unaware that they would have to provide their own response to the threat, despite having been in charge of healthcare in Wales for years. They prevaricated and created different measures and responses, but they want to be part of the UK covid

inquiry rather than holding their own. They seem to think they can pick and choose when they are accountable. It would be fantastic to see the Welsh Government prioritising health as the UK Government are doing, for example by enabling pharmacies in England to prescribe medication for common conditions such as earache and impetigo. It is challenging to be a UK MP in Wales when a matter such as health is devolved. Many people do not realise that it is devolved and blame Westminster for failings.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The hon. Member is making a splendid speech, and my goodness, it rings a bell with me. I have a GP friend in Caithness who developed an aggressive cataract; within a very short space of time she was unable to drive and had to give up her practice. She put her name down with NHS Scotland. Shortly afterwards, she went private and got it dealt with. Fourteen months later, she got a message from the NHS to say she could have a consultation—not a treatment, but a consultation. She would have grabbed it with both hands if she could have got treatment across the border in England. There is a lot wrong with the NHS in Scotland. It is too bad that none of the nationalists are here. They should be pressing for cross-border co-operation as well. Let us hope we get it.

Virginia Crosbie: I thank the hon. Member for sharing some background information on the situation in Scotland and his friend's story of waiting 14 months for a cataract consultation. He makes a very important point: there should be many more Members of Parliament here for the debate. We have the Minister here, and it is an important opportunity to share some of the some of the terrible stories that we hear.

Despite health in Wales not being our gig, it makes up a third of my postbag, and my colleagues and I cannot turn our backs on our constituents. We cannot ignore their problems and blame Wales, because these are life and death situations. We desperately need the UK Government to step in and up the ante on cross-border co-operation. We desperately need the UK Government to take this matter in hand and do something now to protect the wellbeing of British citizens. Will my right hon. Friend the Minister commit to visiting Ynys Môn and meeting my constituents who have suffered as a result of the BCUHB failures and those who desperately need an integrated medical centre in Holyhead?

4.13 pm

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Andrew Stephenson): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dame Caroline. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) on securing this debate on cross-border healthcare. I know the performance of health services across the United Kingdom is a subject close to her heart, as it is for my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Dr Davies) and the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), who have all made important contributions to the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn works tirelessly on improving local health services in her constituency, including by campaigning for an integrated health centre in Holyhead and championing the importance of mental health by pushing for 100 members of the public to undergo a mental health training course in Anglesey.

Although my hon. Friend rightly said that healthcare in Wales has been devolved for 25 years, as a representative of the UK Government and a proud Unionist, I feel it is important that all four nations work together where that is of benefit to the people we represent. For that reason, within my first few weeks in post, I was pleased to visit Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to look at the different approaches being taken to the shared challenges that we face.

During my visit to Wales, I heard directly from some GPs in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Alun Cairns) and met some of the pioneering Welsh life sciences companies whose innovations have so much to offer the NHS across the whole United Kingdom. I would, of course, be delighted to visit the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn to learn more about the challenges that she faces there.

Without doubt, one of the biggest challenges facing all four nations is dealing with the legacy of covid-19, which has left us with record waiting lists. Cutting waiting lists in England is one of the Government's top priorities, and by delivering on the actions set out in the delivery plan for tackling the covid-19 backlog of elective care, we are making good progress on tackling the longest waits. Thanks to the incredible work of NHS staff, as of February this year the number of patients waiting over 18 months had been reduced by almost 90% in England, which is a far faster reduction than we have seen in Wales or Scotland.

A core part of that approach has been empowering patients to make decisions on their care by choosing their provider. Improved choice can not only lead to shorter waiting times for patients and incentivise providers to offer appointments, but have a positive impact on the overall patient experience. However, as the former Health Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), said last year, it is vital that the UK Government and devolved Administrations work together to ensure that no matter where they live, patients can access the care that they need when they need it.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn said, a genuine offer was made to the devolved Administrations, which remains open. We continue our commitment to working closer with the devolved Administrations on elective recovery and access to primary care, on top of the existing cross-border arrangements to allow patients who live in Scotland and Wales to access care in England under certain circumstances, which is paid for by the relevant Administration. That is important because when adjusted for data differences, the Welsh waiting list of 677,000 represents 21.6 patient pathways per 100 population compared with 13.3 per 100 in England. The magnitude of the difference between England and Wales cannot be

accounted for by divergent definitions. That is why the current Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), will be engaging with her counterparts as her predecessor did.

I am pleased to confirm that the next meeting of the inter-ministerial group for health and social care will take place on 24 April. Further, we have agreed to take forward those meetings quarterly. The inter-ministerial group includes Ministers from the UK Government and the devolved Governments who have health and adult social care matters in their portfolios. It provides a forum for strategic discussion between the portfolio Ministers on health and adult social care policy issues, enabling them to engage on areas of shared interest and, where possible, collaborate on policy development and address shared challenges. Moreover, officials have been working on sharing lessons and comparing approaches to demand management and supporting the patients who have been waiting the longest, including through the "Getting it right first time" programme. Those discussions have been constructive in highlighting the benefits of sharing approaches to elective recovery.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn made some excellent points about how critical data is as a tool for improving health and tackling inequalities. This Government and the devolved Administrations have been doing important work to improve data comparability in the UK. Not only is it fundamental that citizens can scrutinise the performance of their health services, but a coherent picture of health across the UK is essential to policy evaluation so that we can provide robust challenge and support where it is needed, and build a deeper understanding of the health outcomes in the different parts of the United Kingdom. The Office for National Statistics has recently expanded its cross-Government work and partnered with health bodies in all four nations to ensure that data is coherent, accessible and meets users' needs. Through that approach, we will enhance our collaborative working and ensure that health services work for every citizen, regardless of geography.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work that she has done to improve health services in Wales and promote the importance of cross-border health co-operation across the entire United Kingdom. She raises the concerns of her constituents with me and other Health Ministers week in, week out. Her constituents could wish for no better representative than her. I hope that what I have said today shows that we are committed to improving health services for everyone across the whole of our United Kingdom.

Question put and agreed to.

4.20 pm

Sitting suspended.

Digital Skills and Careers

4.30 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of digital skills and careers.

It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Caroline, and to welcome the Minister to his place.

The Government have set out an ambitious vision of establishing the UK as a science and tech superpower. The Chancellor has also said that the UK is

“on track to become the world’s next silicon valley.”—[*Official Report*, 6 March 2024; Vol. 746, c. 843.]

While the UK is well placed to harness the opportunities presented by the growth of the digital economy, considerable preparation and investment in education, training and skills will be needed to make the most of those opportunities and to ensure that the UK has the necessary talent pipeline to help it to realise its goal of becoming a tech superpower. It is vital that we ensure that right across all stages of education, from early years to higher education and throughout workplace training, people are given the necessary digital skills to succeed in their career.

Last year, the Prime Minister announced a bold new plan to cement the UK’s place as a global science and technology superpower by 2030, from pursuing transformational technologies such as artificial intelligence and supercomputing to attracting top talent and ensuring they have the tools they need to succeed. We also hosted a successful AI summit that was internationally renowned. The Government have said that they want to be at the forefront of emerging technologies in key high-growth industries, such as cryptocurrency and digital assets, blockchain technologies, Web3 and AI. I have been learning a lot about that as chair of the crypto and digital assets all-party parliamentary group, where I have had to be taken with baby steps through the whole process so I could understand it. It is very complicated. Those new and developing technologies have such potential and they could be the key driver of growth for the UK economy moving forward.

One of the issues raised when speaking to the sector is how many employers say they cannot find the talent they need. If we are to realise the vision, we must ensure the UK is investing in our talent, ensuring that future generations are equipped with the digital skills they need to take advantage of the new career opportunities for what I would probably call a digital Britain that we will all work together to help create.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a fact, I think, that many people who are autistic have huge potential to contribute in terms of information technology skills. They are often at the cutting edge, but those same people often do not get any help at all when leaving school. It seems to me that we are missing a trick here, and on the intelligence front we could really use these people. I hope the hon. Lady agrees with me that we should do something for them.

Dr Cameron: I totally agree; the hon. Member makes an excellent point. Indeed, I have just come from a meeting with DFN Project SEARCH, which works with young people with special needs to give them placements

in a variety of industries, including in digital industries and in this Parliament. We must harness everyone’s potential, and everyone should have the opportunity to realise their potential. We should particularly focus on making sure the transformation is inclusive, including of people with special needs.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for securing the debate; she always brings interesting and sensible debates to Westminster Hall and elsewhere. From the time I have known her, she has always been astute and assiduous on these issues, and I thank her for that.

We should teach the importance of having sound digital skills, especially for most modern jobs, which require that we understand information and communications technology. I say that as one who probably does not, to be truthful—but it is important for young people coming through that they do.

Lloyds Bank found that 18% of adults lack the necessary essential digital skills. Does the hon. Lady agree that consideration should be given to teaching a mandatory ICT lesson within careers classes in all schools across the United Kingdom to ensure that young people have the skills needed to obtain employment in all types of industries? In my constituency, we need young people with those skills. I think the hon. Lady would probably agree that she needs them in her constituency as well.

Dr Cameron: I totally agree. Digital skills are going to be an integral part of the curriculum for everybody moving through the school process, and for people at all stages of their lives; some people might want to change career and move into the digital posts of the future.

If I may give a small anecdote, when I attended one of the APPG’s sessions, the Children’s Parliament came to speak to us. We were talking about the metaverse and a person from Roblox was there. I spend a lot of money on Roblox, as a mother, because children are so interested in it, so I was desperate to speak to this person about what Roblox was really about. He asked a question of those in the room—Members of Parliament; Members of the House of Lords; and Members of the Children’s Parliament, who are aged from about eight to 14—“Who understands the metaverse?” All the children put their hands in the air, but not very many MPs or Lords Members did.

Digital skills should be part of the curriculum, but younger people are quite digitally native; they are quite used to it. I therefore think there must be across-the-lifespan development so that older adults who are in careers in which they have not had the opportunity to gain digital skills can gain them if they would like to. Certainly, we in Parliament have a way to go to catch up with the children in terms of digital understanding. I include myself in that.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): The hon. Member makes a really important point. I am concerned by the lack of digital skills among parliamentarians and legislators, particularly as we are trying to catch up legislation and regulation with the online space and the digital world. That is imperative, given the recent stories about what has been happening to parliamentarians, be that cyber-flashing, sextortion or honey-trapping. It is really important, when we are talking about this area, that our legislators have advanced digital skills.

Dr Cameron: I totally agree. For over two years, the APPG has held sessions for MPs who are interested in this particular sector to try to upskill ourselves. As I said, I totally include myself in that.

We have come quite a long way. When I started about two and a half years ago, we had not had any debates in the House of Commons about cryptocurrency, yet over 2 million people in the UK were engaged in the sector. In some ways, Parliament itself is playing catch-up to what has become quite mainstream in our society but there are risks, as you say. To create competent legislation, we need to be involved and to understand the risks.

The children from the Children's Parliament said that Web3 and the metaverse have extraordinary potential to change their education. For instance, they can understand, through a headset, what it is like to be at the precipice of a volcano. But they said, very clearly, "You have to make it safe." They also wanted additional research on the impact of being online for long periods of the day on mental health and wellbeing, and where the limits and the cut-offs are in that regard. They were really sensible; I was very impressed by them.

A 2022 report by Tech Nation showed that just under 5 million people were working in the UK tech economy, which was an increase from under 3 million in 2019 but more than double the 2.18 million working in the tech economy in 2011. We can see the potential that is growing exponentially. There were also 2 million vacancies for tech roles between May 2021 and 2022, which is a huge amount, from a total of 14.85 million vacancies across the economy as a whole.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): The hon. Lady mentioned skills, on which we have failed to move forward. I will give an example, and I hope she agrees with what I am about to say. Even industries such as diesel mechanics, which relates to heavy goods vehicles, require a lot of digital skills. Unfortunately, our technical colleges are still teaching students about diesel engines that were operating in the 1950s, so they have not moved with the times. The new emissions checks are totally digital, so people need IT skills to achieve some of the emissions regulations. We need flexibility within our education system to integrate digital skills into every aspect of careers.

Dr Cameron: I totally agree. The digital transformation affects every sector. I think about finance, given that I chair the crypto and digital assets all-party parliamentary group, but it also affects health and even international aid. Payments transformation means that we can reach the most vulnerable without intermediaries and get payments to them faster and more seamlessly. It is changing almost every sector, and all our educational establishments need support to develop programmes that give people the skills to which the hon. Gentleman refers.

The UK digital assets sector has the potential to boost economic growth, jobs and skills right across the UK. According to King's College London, in 2021 there were more than 14,000 jobs advertised on LinkedIn in the blockchain industry worldwide. UK-based firms provided almost a quarter of those job advertisements, even though the UK houses less than 7% of the firms worldwide.

A report by Access Partnership and Amazon Web Services published at the start of this year showed that 51% of employers consider hiring talent with AI skills and experience to be a priority, and that boosting AI skills could increase salaries by up to 31% and accelerate career prospects. However, nearly three quarters—71%—of employers said, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned, that they still cannot find the talent that they need, and that it is not incorporated where it should be.

The UK already has a strong track record as a leader, and we want to maintain that leadership and be at the helm of this transformation. We want to be seen as a destination for innovation and businesses that want to start up and scale up across the United Kingdom. We also have to level up. I hear a lot in my role about businesses starting up in London, and that is absolutely fantastic, but that has to be levelled up to give people opportunities right across the UK. The UK boasts some of the most respected universities, and the largest financial services sector and tech ecosystem in Europe. In 2023, the UK tech sector reached a combined market valuation of more than £1 trillion.

Focusing on education and boosting digital skills will therefore be central to the success of the Government's vision and will ensure that people have the skills they need to pursue careers in digital economy transformation. To turn that vision into reality and make the UK a digital and technology superpower, we must not only attract the right talent but build the talent base here through teaching and training in every sector and maximising our talent pipelines.

Last month, the Government pledged more than £1 billion to train millions in high-tech skills in order to cement the UK's place as a technology superpower by 2030 and to create the high-paid jobs of the future. That would be a really positive step in the right direction. We have to be aware that we are facing fierce competition from other countries, so it is vital that we keep the momentum and continue to capitalise on the good base that we already have. We must really maximise the potential here at home.

The International Institute for Management Development, which measures economies on a world digital competitiveness ranking, last year ranked the UK 20th out of 64 economies, so although there has been a good start and we have made progress, there is scope for improvement. In order to become a tech superpower, the UK will need to look at how we boost digital skills from early years through higher and further education and workplace training. I would welcome the Minister's views on what more we can do to embed digital skills training in schools and throughout all stages of education.

Higher education will be crucial in that regard, too. A recent report by techUK highlighted that despite having less than 1% of the world's population, the UK boasts four of the top 10 digital universities. That is a real credit to the work that has been done. We also have 14% of the most highly cited academic publications in the world, which is a huge achievement for the Government and for the United Kingdom.

Ensuring that the UK remains an attractive destination means that we also need to attract people from other countries with the skills that we want to develop here. It would be helpful to look at how to attract people—either

[Dr Cameron]

to university courses or into jobs—who could then train our leaders and innovators of the future in certain parts of the sector where we do not have the talent that we need already established. Industry leaders say that digital technology continues to become an even more essential part of business, so we need to help our small, medium-sized and large businesses to make sure that digital skills are embedded in the work that they do.

Employees can, I think, be worried. I know that when I worked in the NHS, every time there was a digital change, I worried about whether I would be able to do it. Employers need to give people the self-confidence and managers must ensure that there is continuing professional development for staff in businesses across the UK in this sector.

Before I bring my speech to a close, I would like to mention diversity. Having attended a number of conferences looking at digital assets in the UK, I have seen quite a lack of female engagement in the audience, and certainly on the panels that I have taken part in. It was quite stark to me that we are perhaps not making the digital transformation as inclusive as it could be in terms of people from different backgrounds, age groups and ethnic minorities or in terms of the gender gap. That is borne out by a recent study by Forex Suggest, which found that women are vastly under-represented in leadership positions across the blockchain industries, with only 6% of CEOs being women, while men held 94% of the top executive positions. That shows how much work has to be done.

I have two girls who are digitally native. In fact, if my iPad breaks, I often ask my daughter, who is only 10, what to do, and she can fix it very quickly: she just does something and it works again. Children—both girls and boys—are becoming much more confident. However, we need to make sure that that confidence continues through the classroom, through their education and into the workplace, so that women take up those posts and work to the top of those professions that will be so pivotal for the future.

Alex Davies-Jones: The hon. Member is being very generous in taking interventions. She is making a really powerful point. The tech for the future needs to be built by everybody who will be using it. It needs to be inclusive, particularly generative AI and AI large language models. What they are learning from needs to be appropriate, responsible and inclusive. I know we have both worked hard on things like tackling antisemitism. If we want the technology to be taken seriously, it has to be built by everybody who is going to be using it.

Dr Cameron: Yes, it is fundamental to the work going forward to make sure these systems are inclusive and are not built by certain people with certain views that perhaps exclude important sectors of the community. These systems are going to be pivotal for the economy and our lifestyles. Everyone has to be included in making sure that this works and in shaping it in a positive way.

I recently visited RoboThink, an innovative business delivering STEM coding, robotics and engineering programmes in the UK, and in 20 other countries around the world, for children as young as three or four and up to age 10 or 12. They were building and coding robots. It was amazing to see. It struck me that the more

we have those projects in local communities—in kids' spare time external to the curriculum, built into it, or a bit of both—the more we can harness kids being positively engaged and, critically, prepared for the workplace of the future. I can assure hon. Members that those young children were building robots that I could not build. I was very impressed by them.

As chair of the crypto and digital assets APPG, I really feel that this is an important time. We should also work in partnership with business to make sure that, educationally, we are in the leadership position to achieve the Prime Minister's and the Government's aims. I was interested to hear that Ripple launched a university blockchain research initiative in 2018 in collaboration with top universities around the world, including UCL and others, to support technical development, innovation, cryptocurrency and digital payments. Circle, a leading financial technology firm and issuer of USD Coin, partnered with academic institutions through its Circle University to provide education courses to improve digital financial literacy—another really important aspect, particularly for those who perhaps feel digitally excluded.

In February of this year, Tether announced the launch of Tether Edu, a global education initiative dedicated to improving education skills in blockchain, artificial intelligence and coding. Much of this will be a partnership between Governments and industry for the future, so I would welcome the Minister's views on the role of industry in helping to improve digital skills and, in particular, on the potential for further partnerships between Government, educators and private industry.

These days, most jobs are going to be developed with a digital element. We should be ensuring that our education system is able to equip people with the digital skills they need to succeed in their careers and to help to drive economic growth and innovations of the future, and to meet the skills needs that UK and international business leaders say are currently lacking.

The UK has a really solid foundation. Parliament should work cross-party and through the APPGs, with business and educators, not only to make sure that the UK maintains its leadership of the digital Britain I want to see developed, but to create digital innovation for the next generation—I include my own children in that—making sure that they can meet their potential in this new digital world.

Several hon. Members rose—

Dame Caroline Dinenage (in the Chair): Order. Two Members have indicated that they want to speak. I intend to call the Front-Bench speakers at about 5.13 pm, so please conduct yourselves appropriately.

4.53 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Caroline. I will be brief. It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate; I congratulate the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) on securing it. We share many concerns, but we also see the potential for the future and what the UK is capable of—not just for our young people, but for everybody.

As the former shadow Minister for technology and the digital economy and the proud chair of Labour Digital, I am passionate about that potential and the

potential for technology to transform all our lives for the better. With that potential comes an abundance of opportunity, and it is essential that it is grasped with both hands—by individuals and by businesses—so that we can all reap the benefits that are available. We have all heard and felt the concerns about technology and AI having a negative impact on skills, opportunity and careers, but there is a lot to be excited about if we approach this right.

People's lives have become more and more digitalised. Individuals have begun to grasp the digital opportunity with both hands. Conventional ideas about how and where work is undertaken have also transformed as people are able to adapt to the digitalisation of our world. We have all seen that, from a rise in social media influencers to marketing careers, online food and clothing delivery services, and more and more opportunities for growing small businesses online. While technology and AI have been smeared as threats to career opportunities—and of course we need to have regulations in place—we are also seeing the need for adaptation to embrace the potential that this can bring to our economy.

Central to that adaptation is, of course, the need for internet access. We have to get the basics right. When so many millions of people in our country still do not have access to reliable, affordable internet, how can we possibly teach people the digital skills that they need to take advantage of those opportunities? That is why I and the Labour party believe that access to the internet should be a right and not a privilege.

As our world and our economy become more and more digitally dependent, we have to take our people with us to take advantage of those opportunities. We can only achieve that if we ensure that people are fully equipped for that transformation. Of course, assisting people and enhancing their digital skills will also look different for every individual and for every community up and down our wonderful islands. From those in school to those retiring, improving people's digital skills will span a variety of people of different ages, backgrounds, circumstances, and needs, as the hon. Lady has already pointed out.

Someone in their 80s who wants to be able to access healthcare information on an app needs entirely different resources and support from a young individual wanting to improve their coding skills, for example. I hear regularly from older members of my constituency in particular their concerns about being left behind in this transition, but it is not just individuals who fear being left behind; it is wider communities too. From my role proudly chairing the all-party parliamentary group on coalfield communities, I know that stronger policies are needed to grow local economies of our former mining towns. We use the phrase "from coal to code". Forget the silicon valleys—we have the coal valleys, and that is where we need to be investing.

Our recent report, "Next Steps in Levelling Up the Former Coalfields", emphasises the recommendation that growing the economies in those towns is dependent on an investment in skills and training. As I said, we have to get the basics right. Digital skills and digital career training must be at the heart of any plan the Government bring forward to ensure that our communities are meaningfully involved in the economy of the future.

Former mining communities such as the one I represent know exactly what exclusion looks like. Whether it is delayed delivery of fibre-optic broadband services or the reliance that even the Government place on having a smartphone to access basic public services, if the economy of the future is to be online focused, industrial communities like mine need the support to adapt to the change. Cross-departmental working is also crucial to achieve that and to ensure that different people are given different support when necessary. I urge the Minister to ensure that a holistic approach is taken across Government when speaking to the Department for Health and Social Care, the Department for Education and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, to ensure that we have a joined-up approach to tackle the issue head-on.

I am proud that the Labour party is committed to that collaborative working in all our policy areas, not just technology. I know from my current role as shadow Minister for domestic abuse and safeguarding, as well as from my work on what is now the Online Safety Act 2023, that adaptation in the face of developing technologies also means equipping people with the knowledge necessary to protect themselves from those who—disgustingly—weaponise technology as a misogynistic and violent tool.

As a woman in politics, and as the first woman to represent my constituency of Pontypridd, it is essential that I point out that technological advances go hand in hand with an advancement in the way that perpetrators can offend, something that will disproportionately affect women. These are gendered crimes, so we need to make sure that women are equipped with the necessary digital skills to deal with them. We have all seen them, from AI-generated porn to deepfakes, online harassment and the rise of incel ideology. We need to be educating people to ensure they are equipped to deal with what is sadly an inevitable feature of our increasingly digitalised society.

I really welcome the announcement from the Government today on making a new offence of the creation of deepfake pornography—I think it is long overdue—but it is as an amendment to a Criminal Justice Bill that has no confirmed date for its return to the House. We do have to wonder where the priority is. I am also concerned about the nature of these new offences that have been created. They look to be intent-based rather than consent-based, again prioritising the right to banter ahead of a woman's right to feel safe online. We have to get this right. We are all too aware of the impact of AI-generated porn and image-based abuse, both fuelled by misogyny. Tackling those issues, working with the Department for Education, has long been a frustration and motivation for me across the briefs that I have held.

Another big concern I have is about the number of elections this year—hopefully a general election will not be too long coming—and the issue of deepfakes, AI-generated images and videos of potential candidates that could do real harm to people if they do not know what they are looking at and cannot verify their sources. Again, with the rise of misinformation and disinformation online, people need to be confident in what they are reading. They need to be able to be confident in their candidates and that what they are seeing, hearing and watching is true. I really am concerned that elections are coming and people do not have those necessary digital skills, and about the impact that that could have on democracy.

[Alex Davies-Jones]

Yes, people need the digital skills to be able to take full advantage of the great and positive things that are to come, whether that is growing our economy or boosting our place on the world stage, but they also need these skills more than ever to ensure that they can combat the unfortunate dark side that accompanies the digital world. Let us be clear: we have to protect people against the digital dangers caused by perpetrators, but equally we must never shy away from the potential that technology holds.

That all requires enhanced support to help with online literacy in every single aspect of people's lives, so I am keen to hear from the Minister exactly what the Government's digital media literacy strategy is. Sadly, we have seen very little of it of late. It has been left to Ofcom and to the platforms themselves to provide that for people, so I really would like to see some political leadership on this. From careers to education to retirees who just do not want to be left behind, digital skills are essential for our future and must be available to all.

5 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Dame Caroline. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) on securing this important debate.

It really is important that we, as a country, ensure that we have a digitally literate population. If we do not, we deprive people of opportunity, particularly in employment. So much of what we do today relies on us using the internet, whether that is applying for jobs, accessing education and training, banking, paying bills, and accessing other services and leisure opportunities. It is far easier nowadays to find employment online than by using other, traditional means, because there are just so many websites that advertise jobs and so many social media sites where professionals can network.

However, when we look at the statistics, we can see that there is a lot of work to do to ensure that people can take advantage of the job opportunities provided by having good digital skills. Last year's consumer digital index, which is run by Lloyds bank and commissioned by the Department for Education, reported that there are about 13 million people in the UK with very low digital capability, which means that "they are likely to struggle interacting with online services".

That is about a quarter of the UK's adult population. The index also found that 7.5 million people, or 18% of UK adults, lack the essential digital skills needed for the workplace. That is over 7 million people who are missing out on opportunities to progress in work, which is a form of deprivation that must be recognised and addressed. That is vital both for the individuals concerned and for the economy.

Despite the Government's rhetoric about us becoming a tech superpower, it is immensely disappointing that the UK ranks poorly in comparison with other countries when it comes to digital skills. According to the International Institute for Management Development's world digital competitiveness ranking, the UK was ranked 20th in 2023 out of the 64 economies ranked,

but we were 16th in 2022, so our performance clearly dropped. I would be interested to hear why the Minister thinks that was the case.

Older people are much more likely than younger people to struggle with digital skills, according to the consumer digital index. For example, in the 45-to-54 age bracket, 10% of people are below foundation level, which consists of the most fundamental tasks needed to set up an individual for success online. In the 55-to-64 bracket, 16% of people were found to be below foundation level. In the 65-to-74 bracket, that goes up to 29%, and it is higher still for the over-75s, at 37%.

We must bear in mind that adults who have been doing a job, perhaps of a physical nature, may come to a point where they are unable to continue doing it, either because it is no longer available where they live or because of a workplace injury or health condition. They may well then have to consider new types of employment, so we need to ensure that there are opportunities available to allow them to acquire the digital skills they will need to access that employment. That is particularly important for people who live in rural areas, where digital access, ironically, is sometimes weakest; of course, poor public transport can make finding work harder as well. We must ensure that the provision is there so that adults have the chance to improve their digital skills.

We also need to provide adults with a chance to improve their literacy skills. The National Literacy Trust estimates that more than 7 million adults in England—16.4% of the adult population—are functionally illiterate. The Government need to address that as a matter of urgency. We cannot hope that people will improve their digital skills if they do not already have good literacy skills. I have raised that issue numerous times in this place. For example, I tabled an amendment to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill that would have required the Government to include the reducing of geographical disparities in adult literacy as one of their levelling-up missions, and to review levels of adult literacy in the UK during each mission period, to publish the findings of that review and to set up a strategy to improve levels of adult literacy and eradicate illiteracy in the UK. It was immensely disappointing that the Government voted against that, because if we want to address a problem, it is important to understand its extent and make-up.

Adults need greater opportunities to learn and to improve their literacy and digital skills, yet adult skills spending has been cut under the Conservatives. Last December, the Institute for Fiscal Studies pointed out that "total skills spending in 2024-25 will be 23% below 2009-10 levels."

That is really shocking and comes despite an increase in total spending on adult skills in recent years. The IFS goes on to say:

"Spending on classroom-based adult education has fallen especially sharply",

driven by falling learner numbers and real-terms cuts in funding rates, and will be more than 40% below 2009-10 levels in 2024-25. That is very damaging to our economy, and the situation needs to be reversed. We need to see a significant increase in investment in adult skills so that those adults who struggle digitally or with literacy can acquire the necessary skills to help with their career prospects and in everyday life.

We need to ensure that everyone has reliable and affordable access to the internet. In relation to employment and careers, that is particularly important for people who rely on working remotely, who could live in rural areas, have caring responsibilities or be in ill health. It is also important for people on low incomes and those living in poverty.

There are some good initiatives to try to help digitally excluded people get online. I would like to mention the work of the Good Things Foundation national databank, which provides free mobile SIM cards to help digitally excluded people get connected. Those are distributed by churches and community groups. I encourage MPs across the House to look at the work that the foundation does and to consider how it might be able to assist people in their constituencies. According to the foundation, 2.5 million households in the UK struggle to afford the internet, and one in 14 households have no home internet access at all. Clearly, poverty is also a barrier to digital literacy.

It is important that the Government ensure that everyone is able to reach their potential. In today's jobs market, confidence in digital skills has an important part to play in helping people to do that. We need a commitment from the Government to extend access to adult literacy and digital skills training in our communities, especially in areas of deprivation. We need action on the provision of broadband right across the country so that no one and no area is left behind.

5.7 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Caroline. I welcome the Minister to his new role, and I congratulate the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) on securing the debate. She has hit on one of the important and strategically significant issues of our day, and made the point that there is a whole set of issues and new disciplines that policymakers need to catch up with.

The subject of digital skills covers a range of disciplines. It could mean digital literacy for engagement with services; accessing information online; office-based skills, such as creating spreadsheets or presentations; or new digital social media tools. It also covers business software use and development; confidence with hardware, including mobile phones; social media for businesses; data analytics; and so much more, as has been highlighted. Indeed, the hon. Lady talked about how Britain becomes a science and technology superpower and leads the way in cyber-security, AI and so much more.

Digital skills are crucial for the future of our economy, businesses and workforce. That is why a core pillar of Labour's industrial strategy is to harness data for the public good and to transform digital skills. Database technologies are already transforming our economy. For example, AI is being used to prevent fraud, enable search engines and develop vaccines and medicines.

Hon. Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) and for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), have made powerful points. The key point about inclusion—whether by place, demographics, needs, disabilities or the gender divide—is how, not by accident but by design, we can create and work towards the future in terms of how Britain performs.

As a nation, we are way behind where we need to be. The Government have failed to equip young people and the existing workforce with the digital skills they need. That has been demonstrated in some of the research that has been quoted today. Fewer than half of British employers believe that young people have the right digital skills, and we do much worse in computer skills than most of our economic rivals.

As has been mentioned, the 2023 Lloyds bank report commissioned by the Department for Education found that about 13 million people in the UK had the lowest level of digital capability, which means they are likely to struggle to interact with online services. That is an enormous number. The digital skills gap is estimated to cost the UK economy £63 billion per year, and 46% of businesses struggle to recruit for roles that require hard data skills. That also absolutely has an impact on our productivity, such that we sit 16% below international competitors such as the US and Germany.

The Digital Skills Council has found that the barriers to the uptake of digital skills courses include opportunity barriers such as lack of encouragement, restricted options, low teaching quality or even the capacity to access courses in local areas. It also found that those barriers hinder early-career switches for those aged between 27 and 35 and prevent those people from upskilling digitally. That is critical, given the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West made about people being able to move from job to job or from career to career in a changing economy. We also know that the total number of information and communications technology-related apprenticeship starts has fallen by almost 30% since the start of this Parliament. There are core structural and strategic issues that have not been dealt with effectively by the Government.

There need to be solutions that are commensurate with the challenge. The last Labour Government introduced the statutory digital entitlement for adults with low digital skills. Similarly, boosting digital skills will be a national priority for the next Labour Government. That work will be led by a new national body, Skills England, which will drive the skills needs of our industrial strategy and the green prosperity plan, making sure that we deliver those things in line with what is needed on the ground through the local skills improvement plans, working with employers, unions and civil society. We will also reform the apprenticeship levy so that employers can use up to 50% of their total levy contributions on more flexible course, which, as the Minister will know, was called for by the Manufacturing 5, UKHospitality, techUK and so many others.

The system needs to work together. Young people need to understand developing technologies, to be able to use and shape them, and to understand the opportunities and risks. That is why our curriculum review will embed digital literacy and skills throughout children's learning and ensure that the curriculum keeps up with technological change.

In conclusion, I have some questions for the Minister. Will he outline what steps the Government are taking to reduce the barriers to uptake of digital skills courses and to address digital literacy gaps? Why are the Government not sufficiently addressing the significant gender disparity in the uptake of computing GCSEs and A-levels, with 92% of those starting A-level courses being male students? That critical issue needs addressing.

[Seema Malhotra]

Finally, how is the Minister working with businesses to understand the digital skills needs of the future, how skills needs can best be met now and what we can do to future-proof our courses? Ensuring that the workforces of today and tomorrow have the digital skills they need is vital for our citizens, our economy, our industry and our public services.

5.13 pm

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Luke Hall): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) on securing a debate on this vital subject.

We live in a digital age. Digital skills are essential to support a successful economy and to ensure that people of all ages have the skills they need for their chosen careers. In the UK, we have a world-leading digital economy. To enhance that position, we need to ensure that people can develop digital skills throughout their lifetime—a point that has been made throughout the debate. Such skills will benefit individuals and employers.

Now is the time for us to act and to deliver our ambitions by investing in digital education and skills and building a diverse pipeline of future talent. If my hon. Friend is happy for me to do so, I will set out some of the work that the Government have been doing and the context for it, and then I will pick up on some of the points that she and other colleagues have raised during the debate.

We need that pipeline of talent because, quite simply, digital skills are needed in nearly all careers in our country these days. There are more and more digital jobs and careers in which the digital element of skills is absolutely central to the role.

We know—I think every Member raised this point in the debate—that there is a digital skills gap to address. As the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), said, that gap has been estimated to cost the UK economy £63 billion a year. That was a key theme of today's debate, and it is one that the Government do not take lightly.

Digital jobs grew by 9% last year and are projected to continue to grow by 9% to 2030 and to a significantly higher level thereafter. Sixty per cent of all businesses believe their reliance on advanced digital skills will increase over the next five years, and analysis that the DFE will publish imminently highlights the importance of digital skills across sectors. Of those that are most relevant to critical technologies, the four with the highest levels of employment all relate to digital and computing. That analysis shows how reliant we are on computer science graduates to fill relatively entry-level occupations. We need to ensure that employers and learners are aware of the high-quality technical routes that are available to gain those vital digital skills.

At a local level, digital was one of the top five sectors in which skills needs were identified across the local skills improvement plans. That is a key part of the work that we are doing to engage with businesses and local authorities, bringing together the sector to ensure that we are delivering the right sorts of jobs and entries into the workplace.

It is clear that we have to address the issue in our economy, and we are taking action to do so. One of our beliefs is that the digital skills journey for so many people starts in our schools. To address the growing demand for people with computing and digital skills, we introduced computing as a statutory national curriculum subject back in 2014 across key stages 1 to 4. To provide a basis for further study and careers in digital—including in AI, as was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow—the computing curriculum ensures that pupils are taught the principles of information and computation, how digital systems work in the modern era, and how to put that knowledge to use through programming.

To ensure that pupils receive a high-quality computing education, we invested over £100 million in the National Centre for Computing Education, providing primary and secondary teachers with the support that they need to drive up participation in computer science at GCSE and A-level. Over 13,000 teachers have engaged with subject knowledge courses, boosting their confidence to teach engaging and effective lessons in this area. Crucially, in post-16 education, the computer science A-level further develops students' understanding and application of the principles and concepts of computer science, whether that is abstraction, decomposition, logic, algorithms or data representation.

Digital T-levels are also supporting progression to occupations such as software development technician. I went on an incredible visit a couple of weeks ago to Bridgwater and Taunton College, where I met some digital T-level students who were hugely passionate about the work that they were doing. The college has a really positive partnership with different digital technological providers, including Apple, to ensure that students not only have good work and engagement placements, but have the technology that they need as their opportunities on those courses develop. It is not just occupations in the digital sector where good digital skills are needed; relevant digital skills are built into every T-level qualification.

Points were quite rightly raised during the debate about the workforce. One of the steps we have taken to boost teacher retention is investing £100 million a year—this year and in the next financial year—to ensure that every early career teacher of STEM and technical subjects, including computing and digital courses, receives up to £6,000 annually on top of their pay. The investment is targeted at teachers in their first five years of teaching in disadvantaged schools and colleges, ensuring that we help to tackle some of the hotspots with particular challenges. We already offer those levelling-up premium payments to computing teachers in their first five years, but the expansion will double the payments and extend the scheme to eligible further education teachers.

We are also funding flexible skills bootcamps at level 3 and free courses for jobs, which include a range of in-demand digital qualifications and provision such as network architecture, data analytics and coding. I met representatives of the Institute of Coding last week at the University of Bath, one of our digital skills bootcamp providers. I will return to diversity in the sector more generally in a moment, but one of the incredible statistics was that more than 44% of starts in the digital skills bootcamp now are from women. There is a huge amount more to do, but that shows that having different avenues

into the workforce and different types of training interventions can have a massive impact and be one part of tackling the issue.

At levels 4 and 5, the first higher technical qualifications were in digital occupations, and 56 HTQs are available for teaching, with a further 10 approved for first teaching in September. Employers in the digital sector have developed 32 high quality apprenticeships from level 3 to degree level in exciting fields, including cyber-security, software development and AI. In 2020, we introduced a digital entitlement, funding adults with low digital skills to study essential digital skills qualifications and digital functional skills qualifications, developed against new employer-supported national standards, which provided learners with the essential skills they need to participate properly and actively in the workforce.

We have also introduced institutes of technology, which are employer-led collaborations—another theme that has been raised several times in this debate. They are bringing together the best existing FE provision with HE partners to build a high-skilled workforce to respond to the needs of the employer, which is crucial. Of the 21 IOTs, 19 have been launched already, and they all include a digital specialism.

Higher education is a key pipeline for digital jobs—a point that was well made by my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow. Through the strategic priorities grant, we are directing funding towards strategically important subjects, including computing and IT courses. From 2025, the lifelong learning entitlement will transform access to further and higher education so all adults have the equivalent of four years' worth of student loans to use flexibly on a quality education and skills over their lifetime.

My hon. Friend and other hon. Members have shown strong interest in ensuring that we embrace the opportunities and advances that AI offers and that we make use of technologies such as blockchain, which is fundamental to the future of our digital economy in some ways. In schools, the computing curriculum as a foundational subject for all key stages ensures pupils have a broad knowledge of the skills they need to specialise in later, for example in AI, facilitating further study. At the other end of the pipeline, we have an AI data specialist apprenticeship standard approved for delivery at level 7. That highly skilled role champions AI and its applications, promoting the adoption of novel tools and technologies.

Margaret Greenwood: The Minister is putting an awful lot into his speech, which is good. Can he tell us what the Government are doing to look at which areas of digital jobs will be under threat with the development of AI? Today's landscape will not be the same in five years' time. What work has his Department been doing on that? Is it informing the courses that are being provided? We do not want people to invest a lot of time and money in training for something, only for AI to come and wipe it off the map.

Luke Hall: I thank the hon. Member for raising that issue. Let me make a couple of points. First, yes, we are absolutely looking at the matter as a Government Department. Secondly, we are working with external partners and providers too, whether that is through the LSIPs or other mechanisms, to forward-look at what skills are needed as part of our economic model, not just now but in the years to come. We are doing that in

multiple ways; perhaps I can write to the hon. Member with more information. I can assure her that work is under way through LSIPs and in other ways.

The hon. Member for Feltham and Heston and my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow raised points about female participation in digital skills. I mentioned the importance of using digital skills bootcamps as a lever and a mechanism to tackle that issue, but we know that there is a lack of diversity, particularly gender diversity, within the digital skills pipeline. Only 15% of the UK's programmers and software development professionals are female. That is why we are supporting programmes to widen participation in digital and wider science, technology, engineering and mathematics careers, including through the National Centre for Computing Education's "I Belong" programme.

We are also putting £30 million into an AI and data science conversion course programme, funding universities to develop masters-level AI and data science courses suitable for non-STEM students. There are up to 2,600 scholarships for students from backgrounds under-represented in the tech industry. Of course there is more to do, and we look forward to working with my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow to tackle that challenge.

The hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) spoke passionately about some of the challenges facing her own community, as well as some of the opportunities that digital advancements and AI can bring. I took particular note of a couple of her points. First, she was absolutely right to highlight that this area cuts across all Departments and all layers of government, including local government, the devolved Administrations and the Government here at Westminster; I can assure her that I will certainly tackle that issue wherever I can. She also highlighted her work with the APPG and the report she has produced on coalfield communities; I would love to meet her and talk more about the recommendation in that report. I look forward to reading it and will be happy to discuss it further.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), who is no longer in his place, made an intervention about the importance of ensuring that individuals with special educational needs have the right level of access to digital skills. That is a crucial point, and I want to assure all hon. Members that we are taking action in that area. We are ensuring that all colleges have a named person with oversight for SEND, that colleges have due regard to the SEND code of practice, that apprenticeships have diversity champions and that institutes of technology are looking at a diverse workforce. I am always happy to talk to colleagues about that important issue.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow again for securing this debate. There is a clear, unanimous voice on the importance of digital skills, ensuring that everybody in our country has equal and clear access to those skills, and future-proofing our workforce. I have set out our offer to ensure that the UK has the digital skills to remain a science and technology superpower. That is just the start. Every individual, business, employer and part of our economy needs digital skills. Of course there is more to do, but I am sure that by working together, including with providers and employers, we will deliver the digital skills that our country needs for the future.

5.27 pm

Dr Cameron: I thank everybody who has taken part in this debate on a very important issue. I am pleased that we have been able to work together to identify the key challenges for those from rural areas and minority backgrounds, and in terms of the gender gap. We have talked about a holistic approach and why it is important to level up across the UK and right across the lifespan.

I thank the Minister for a comprehensive response. I think that the future is positive for the UK in this regard. We have an innovative workforce and there is a

digital generation up and coming; I see it all around me. We are fortunate to have a Prime Minister who has a clear and proactive vision for digital Britain moving forward.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of digital skills and careers.

5.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 16 April 2024

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Duty of Candour in Health and Social Care: Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): On 6 December 2023, I informed the House that the Department of Health and Social Care will lead a review into the effectiveness of the statutory duty of candour for health and social care providers in England.

The duty of candour is set out in regulation 20 of the Health and Social Care Act 2008 (Regulated Activities) Regulations 2014. It has been in place for NHS trusts and NHS foundation trusts since 2014 and for all other providers regulated by the Care Quality Commission since 2015.

The duty of candour is a crucial instrument for promoting an open and transparent culture in health and social care, ensuring patients and service users or their families receive a full account of events, and a meaningful, timely apology when things go wrong during the provision of health and care services. Providers must also provide those affected with reasonable support and details of further enquiries or investigations that need to be made. The duty is about providers taking reasonable steps to ensure they communicate with those affected in a way that is as accessible and supportive as possible.

Today, I wish to inform the House that we are publishing a call for evidence as part of the review. A call for evidence will allow my Department to capture and consider a wide range of views, including expert opinions, about how the duty is being honoured, monitored and enforced, and the extent to which the policy has met its objectives.

The call for evidence will run for six weeks and close on 29 May 2024.

We will consider all responses to the call for evidence and use them to inform our recommendations for better meeting the policy objectives of the duty of candour.

The call for evidence will be published on www.gov.uk and a copy will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS408]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Hotel Exits

The Minister for Legal Migration and the Border (Tom Pursglove): The Government are committed to implementing effective measures to address the challenges posed by irregular migration, ensure the integrity of our borders, and reduce the burden on the taxpayer.

While allowing the Home Office to fulfil its statutory obligations towards destitute asylum seekers, Ministers have worked to cut reliance on hotels by expanding and driving efficiencies in the asylum accommodation estate. We have maximised the utilisation of bed spaces in the existing asylum estate, which has resulted in 72 fewer

hotels being opened in 2023 than otherwise would have been required, and we are committed to going further to end our reliance on hotels.

We have undertaken work across Government to secure alternative sites that provide sustainable and cost-effective accommodation to house asylum seekers, with further sites in development. In addition, we continue with the implementation of the regional allocation plans for dispersed accommodation, which will further relieve pressure on communities through equitable dispersal.

The Prime Minister's commitment to clearing the legacy asylum backlog has been met, further reducing the need to use hotels. By streamlining processes and increasing efficiency, over 74,000 initial decisions were made on asylum applications in 2023, which is four times more than in 2022.

We now have 20,000 fewer asylum seekers accommodated in hotels than in September 2023—a reduction of 36%.

This week we will have returned 50 hotels to their communities for commercial use since the start of March 2024, and since October last year will have ended the use of 150 hotels by the beginning of May.

In conclusion, the Government's commitment to reducing hotel use for asylum seekers reflects our broader efforts to stop the boats, cut irregular migration, strengthen border security, and relieve pressure on local communities.

[HCWS407]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

AI Safety Research: UK-US Partnership

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Michelle Donelan): I am pleased to inform the House that myself and US Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo, on behalf of the UK and the US, signed a memorandum of understanding on 1 April.

The MOU will enable our AI Safety Institutes to work together to follow through on commitments made at the AI Safety Summit held last November at Bletchley Park. It will allow us to develop an interoperable programme of work and approach to AI safety research. This will help us achieve our shared objectives of ensuring the safe development and use of advanced AI.

Specifically, through this MOU, we intend to engage in the following joint activities:

- Develop a shared approach to model evaluations, including the underpinning methodologies, infrastructures and processes.
- Perform at least one joint testing exercise on a publicly accessible model.

- Collaborate on AI safety technical research, to advance international scientific knowledge of frontier AI models and to facilitate sociotechnical policy alignment on AI safety and security.

- Explore personnel exchanges between the UK and US AI Safety Institutes.

- Share information with one another across the breadth of their activities, in accordance with national laws and regulations, and contracts.

The institutes are already working together to align their scientific approaches, and to accelerate and rapidly iterate robust suites of evaluations for AI models, systems and agents. This will put us in a good position to evaluate the next generation of advanced AI models.

I launched the AI Safety Institute at the AI Safety Summit at Bletchley Park in November last year, making it the first state-backed organisation focused on advanced AI for the public interest. At that time, we set out our ambition for the UK AI Safety Institute to advance the world's knowledge of AI safety by carefully examining, evaluating, and testing new types of AI. We have delivered on this intention by developing the capabilities and capacity of our institute into a world-leading organisation. The AI Safety Institute is conducting the world's first Government evaluations of advanced AI systems. We aim to push the frontier by developing state-of-the-art evaluations for safety-relevant capabilities and conducting fundamental AI safety research. The institute will share its progress with the world to facilitate an effective global response to the opportunities and risks of advanced AI.

This formal partnership provides the basis for further international AI safety co-operation. The UK and US AI Safety Institutes will work with other countries to

promote AI safety, manage frontier AI risks, and develop linkages between countries on AI safety research. To achieve this, the institutes will work together to develop international standards for AI safety testing and other standards applicable to the development, deployment of use of frontier AI models. We will progress this international collaboration bilaterally and multilaterally in existing multilateral fora, including the upcoming AI Seoul Summit, to be co-hosted by the UK and the Republic of Korea next month.

In closing, I reaffirm this Government's commitment to tackling the challenges posed by AI head-on. Through collaboration, innovation, and shared determination, we will continue to lead the way in ensuring a safer and more responsible AI landscape for generations to come.

[HCWS409]

Petition

Tuesday 16 April 2024

OBSERVATIONS

HOME DEPARTMENT

Warwickshire Hunt

The petition of residents of Warwickshire,

Declares that on Wednesday December 14 2022, Warwickshire Police issued a Community Protection Notice (CPN) to the Warwickshire Hunt Limited after repeated anti-social use of public roads in Warwickshire; notes that the hunt put in an appeal meaning the CPN was unenforceable until the appeal had been heard; further notes that the CPN would have been a sensible and reasonable solution to keep the community safe on the roads; further notes that days before it was due in court, Warwickshire Police dropped the CPN, replacing it with a non-legally binding 'protocol'; further notes that Warwickshire Police are refusing to publish the contents of this secret agreement they now have with the Warwickshire Hunt; further notes that it has been reported that Warwickshire's Police and Crime Commissioner is a membership of Countryside Alliance which campaigns for fox hunting; and further declares that it would be in the best interests of the public and police to bring full transparency to this issue and make the protocol public.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to require that Warwickshire Police publish the contents of the protocol.

And the petitioners remain etc.—[Presented by Matt Western, *Official Report*, 25 March 2024; Vol. 747, c. 1362.]

[P002945]

Observations from the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp):

The Government recognise that hunting is an emotive matter for all those who legally participate in, and protest against, hunting, as well as members of the wider community. It is right that police forces take an independent and impartial operational stance in line with current legislation.

Warwickshire Police put a protocol in place after the withdrawal of the CPM in regard to the 2023-24 season to address road safety concerns. That protocol has now concluded. Publication of that document is a matter for Warwickshire Police.

Warwickshire Police will publish a public code of behaviour before the start of the 2024-25 season, setting out the expectations for anyone taking part in trail hunting activities in the county.

Warwickshire Police recognise the importance of balancing the rights of residents, those who wish to trail hunt within the law, and those who wish to legally protest. Warwickshire Police will continue to engage and work with all parties before and during the next season.

Warwickshire police have also provided an updated statement on the issue which can be found here:

<https://www.warwickshire.police.uk/police-forces/warwickshire-police/areas/warwickshire-police/campaigns/campaigns/2020/warwickshire-rural-crime-team/fox-hunting/addressing-road-safety-concerns-linked-to-hunt-activity/>

Written Correction

Tuesday 16 April 2024

Ministerial Correction

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

Faith-based Discrimination and Harassment

The following extract is from Questions to the Minister for Women and Equalities on 20 March 2024.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I welcome the Minister's comments. We are all behind her, and endorse what she said, but can she give me some idea of recent progress she has made on delivering the Inclusive Britain action plan?

Felicity Buchan: We have been doing lots of work on that, and will be releasing the report today.

[*Official Report*, 20 March 2024; Vol. 747, c. 920.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan):

Felicity Buchan: We have been doing lots of work on that, and will be releasing a **report today by the independent Inclusion at Work Panel**.

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