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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Friday 19 July 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Covid-19 Inquiry

9.34 am

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the covid-19 inquiry. Yesterday, Baroness Hallett published her report from the first module of the UK covid-19 inquiry, which examines the resilience and preparedness of the United Kingdom between 2009 and early 2020.

My thoughts, and I am sure the thoughts of the whole House, are with the families of those who lost loved ones during the pandemic. Their grief and the nature of their loss is harrowing, with so many loved ones lost before their time; so many heartbreaking last goodbyes said over a phone or iPad; and in some cases there was not even the chance to say goodbye at all. So many friends and family members were denied even the chance to go to a funeral, and many others found their lives changed by covid forever. We can only begin to imagine the anguish and anger that people feel, because this report confirms what many have always believed: that the country was not as prepared as it should have been, and that more could and should have been done.

Baroness Hallett is unequivocal:

“The UK was ill prepared for dealing with a catastrophic emergency, let alone the coronavirus...pandemic”.

She finds that “processes, planning and policy” across all four nations failed our citizens. There were fundamental failures of state, with poorly performing public services, as well as health and social inequalities contributing to our vulnerability.

The inquiry finds that

“the UK prepared for the wrong pandemic”,

with a focus on influenza to the effective exclusion of other potential pathogens. There was a lack of leadership, a lack of appropriate challenge and oversight from Ministers and officials, which allowed major gaps to open up in the UK’s resilience in the period leading up to the pandemic.

Baroness Hallett finds

“fatal strategic flaws underpinning the assessment of the risks” and

“a failure to learn sufficiently from past civil emergency exercises and outbreaks of disease.”

Ministers and officials took false comfort from a positive analysis of the UK’s preparedness. Not enough thought was given to how we might seek to prevent the worst effects of a pandemic, such as with a system of test and trace, rather than accepting the consequence of spread as inevitable.

In this emergency, the cracks in our society were exposed. The inequalities were glaring, and that weakened the response. That is why the report’s findings on the most vulnerable are so important: what it says about the elderly, ethnic minorities and those already subject to existing health inequalities, particularly in the early months of the pandemic; those with higher risk of serious illness who were asked to shield for extended periods; those living in overcrowded houses, working in the gig economy or on low incomes; those who suffered as a result of the appalling increase in domestic abuse during the lockdowns; and, of course, disruption to education and the inequalities of vastly different access to online learning and IT equipment. Resilience has to be for all of us, not just some of us.

The underlying picture that this report sets out is stark. Before the pandemic began, our public services were already stretched to their limit, during what should have been normal times. This was especially true of the NHS, overstretched even before the pandemic hit, and key workers in other services, overburdened in normal times and then asked to go above and beyond. A nation can only be as resilient as the foundational strength of its infrastructure and public services.

As I stand here today with 8 million people on NHS waiting lists, prisons overflowing, councils pushed to the brink and public services in a worse position than they were even in 2020, we must ensure that we are prepared. Baroness Hallett says that it is not a question of if another pandemic will strike, but when. Resilience is not just about another pandemic, but about the full range of risk that we face. We are reminded of that this morning as reports come in about a global IT outage affecting airlines, GP surgeries, banks, media and other organisations. It is not easy to know what the future holds. We cannot plan fully for every possible risk, but we must do what we can to learn the lessons of this period.

The Government’s first responsibility is to keep the public safe. That is a top priority of this Government. With a long-term approach to strengthening our national resilience, I shall lead a review of our national resilience against the range of risks that the UK faces. I shall chair a dedicated Cabinet Committee on resilience to oversee that work. Of course, it is not just about central Government, so we will work with the devolved Governments, regional mayors and local leaders as we consider the report’s recommendations. When we have an emergency, we should do everything we can to work together locally and nationally. The Prime Minister has already started to reset relationships with critical partners, because resilience is too important for division to get in the way. Instead, it has to be about co-operative strength.

Some improvements to our operational effectiveness have already been made. The previous Administration did make efforts to improve preparedness. These include changes in the way that the Government access, analyse and share data, including with the public. They also changed the risk assessment processes and the way in which the centre of Government works to prepare for and respond to crises. As an incoming Government, in office for just two weeks, we will look at those efforts in the coming months as we develop our own approach. Where things are good, they should be kept; where they are not good enough, they should be changed.

[Pat McFadden]

The inquiry's report recommends improvements in the way whole-system risks are assessed and managed across the UK Government and the devolved Governments, and improvements to the leadership and oversight provided by Ministers. The Government will carefully consider all the findings and recommendations, including any from the Grenfell inquiry that also have a bearing on resilience planning. We will respond in full within six months.

We will also play our full part in international efforts to improve global health and pandemic preparedness, from disease surveillance and vaccine development to strengthening health systems in the global south and building even greater international co-operation. The United Kingdom has a huge amount to offer and it is in our national interest to do so, because, as we have seen so powerfully, pandemics do not respect international borders, so global health security is an essential element of national security.

I wish to thank Baroness Hallett and her team for all their work so far and for putting the voices of the bereaved at the heart of the inquiry. Amid the tragedy of the pandemic, the British people came together in the most extraordinary ways—from the incredible service and sacrifice of our frontline workers, not least in the NHS, to the generosity of volunteers across our communities supporting one another with acts of kindness. It was a story of service that showed the very best of our country. This Government of service are determined to learn the lessons from this inquiry and to prepare as best we can for the future. That is the duty that we have to the people we serve, and indeed to the memory of those we lost. It is in that spirit that I commend this statement to the House.

9.43 am

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): I thank the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster not only for early sight of his statement, for which I am grateful, but for his tone in how he addressed what is an extremely sobering report—module 1 of nine. I suspect that we will look at many more such sobering reports in the coming months.

I put on the record our gratitude to Lady Hallett and her team for the work that they have done and to all the witnesses who gave evidence, particularly those who had experienced loss and trauma. That evidence was vital, but giving it will not have been in any way easy, given what they had been through. I pay tribute to them. This module, the first of nine, is not only a hugely important piece of work, but the least this country owes to those who lost loved ones in the course of the pandemic.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster rightly talked about how this country came together in the face of an unprecedented event, about which we learned more every day as the country had to adapt to changing knowledge. I join him in paying tribute to emergency workers and all across the country who worked in whatever way to come together and help the country get through, but particularly to those who worked in the NHS and care services and those who lost someone. It was an incredibly traumatic time for the entire country.

What has been set out by the right hon. Gentleman today and by Lady Hallett yesterday is deeply sobering. It lays bare failures of the state in respect of planning, challenge, resourcing and leadership. Irrespective of Government or party in power, it is incumbent upon us all to consider it in the spirit in which Lady Hallett has put forward her recommendations.

I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his recognition of the work already done since the pandemic to improve resilience in this country and ensure that we are better prepared for the next one. We started that work in government, having announced the largest overhaul of our resilience structures in decades. We created the resilience directorate within the Cabinet Office, breaking it out from day-to-day crisis management so that it could focus on resilience, horizon scanning and better preparedness. We set up the resilience academy to increase and improve the training of Ministers, MPs, civil servants and all those in civil society who respond to crises. We also announced a new national exercising programme to test our systems.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster highlighted that the focus of previous pandemic preparedness planning was around influenza. It was seen in the context of Operation Cygnus, which was often pointed to as the blueprint of how to prepare for these things. The right hon. Gentleman was right that it focused on influenza, for which we have therapeutics; in the case of the covid pandemic, we did not. As a country and a civil society, we need to look completely across the piece at how we can best prepare for whatever eventuality may occur.

In setting out his next steps, the right hon. Gentleman adopted exactly the right approach; I am grateful to him for that and for his candour. There will be many more lessons still to learn. It is incredibly important for our country, this Government and any future Government that we learn the lessons to ensure that we are ready for future pandemics, however painful those lessons are. I am also grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's commitment to respond swiftly.

I have a few questions for the right hon. Gentleman. What plans does he have to consult the devolved Administrations and local government structures on the detailed changes proposed to how they would operate in the context of a future emergency? What steps will he and the Government be taking to ensure that our emergency planning structures are more cohesively joined up if our country is to face another pandemic?

More importantly, I want to conclude by saying that we stand ready to work constructively and openly with the right hon. Gentleman and the Government in the national interest to ensure that, as a country, we learn the lessons from this module and from Lady Hallett's future recommendations to build better resilience in our country and ensure that, irrespective of who is in government, the country is better prepared in future. That is the least that all of us in the House owe the country and those who lost loved ones or suffered in so many different ways—those whose mental health suffered, the children who suffered from not being able to go to school, those who suffered from domestic abuse, and those up and down the country who in many ways still suffer from what happened back then.

As I have said, I approach this issue in a spirit of co-operation with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. I look forward to working with him in the national interest and to building resilience for the future.

Pat McFadden: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his response and for the tone in which he spoke. He set out what the previous Government have done, and in my statement I acknowledged that progress has been made, but I think it is also right that a new Government take the opportunity to have a fresh look at this, with fresh eyes and in the right spirit.

The right hon. Gentleman asked a couple of questions on consultation with the devolved Administrations. Yes, that is essential, as is consultation within England with local authorities and elected mayors. It is important that different parts of the country work together when there is a national emergency. There were also questions about how this operates within Government and the balance of responsibility between the centre and individual Government Departments. Baroness Hallett is quite clear that in a truly national emergency the centre has to step up and responsibility cannot be left to individual Departments.

The right hon. Gentleman was right to conclude with the spirit of co-operation that we need on this issue. This work is in the national interest and in the public's interest. It is the first duty of any Government of any political stripe to do what they can to protect the public. The challenge is that the risks we face are more complex and more unpredictable than they have been in the past. As I said in my statement, we cannot fully plan for every risk, but we have to try to have a system in place that gives us the best possible chance of planning for the risks we can see in front of us.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. Like everyone, my thoughts are with the many victims who tragically lost their lives. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the hard-working staff at St Thomas' hospital in my constituency who cared for so many people in their last dying days, and who cared for the former Prime Minister when he caught covid-19. You will be aware, Mr Speaker, that the national covid memorial wall is in my constituency—a stark reminder of the many lives that were lost, each heart painstakingly painted by a family member and dedicated to their lost one. It is a reminder of the many lives that were lost. Will my right hon. Friend visit the covid memorial wall with me and meet the families, and look at how we can make that wall permanent? This is not just about resilience, but about remembering those victims who tragically lost their lives.

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to pay tribute to the staff at St Thomas' and other NHS staff across the country, who did so much to care for people during that very difficult period. I have visited the memorial wall in her constituency, and she is right: it is an incredibly moving and human experience. I am very happy to take up her invitation to visit again.

Mr Speaker: I call the Lib Dem spokesperson.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I am covering for our spokesperson, who sadly cannot be here today.

I start by paying tribute to Baroness Hallett and all those who have painfully given evidence to this inquiry. It will not have been easy for them and our hearts go

out to them. This will be a painful day. The inquiry's damning findings confirm in clear terms what we unfortunately already knew, and this must be a moment for change. The country was badly let down during the pandemic and this new Government must ensure that lessons are learned swiftly. The Liberal Democrats called for this inquiry back in 2020 and we will continue to demand that the full facts be known about every aspect of this catastrophic failure.

One area of particular focus was the lack of leadership provided by the then Conservative Government. The inquiry found that proper scrutiny and accountability was often missed by Ministers. That is why Back Benchers across this House set up the all-party parliamentary group on coronavirus, which I was privileged to chair. Over 18 months we heard from frontline workers, public health professionals and bereaved families, and there was a deep frustration that they could see what was going wrong, but it was falling on deaf ears in Whitehall.

This is a moment to change how politics works, and I hope the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the Government will work across the aisle. What will the Government do to ensure that the right voices are in the room for future such health emergencies, and do they agree that we need a commissioner for ageing and older people, as the Liberal Democrats have been advocating?

Care homes were another area of critical failure. Many of those victims died not directly from covid but because of the lack of care. Do the Government agree that patients and care home residents should be given a new legal right to maintain contact in all health and care settings?

The third area that has been under-reported is long covid. Many of us will remember standing in the cold in November banging on our drums for frontline workers, yet they have not received compensation for a disability that has put them out of their beloved profession. Will the Cabinet Office work with the Department for Work and Pensions to progress the compensation scheme that is in train and to gather the right evidence to ensure that we get it right?

Mr Speaker: Ahem.

Layla Moran: Very finally, on the memorial, will the Minister implement the recommendations in the final report of the UK Commission on Covid Commemoration?

Mr Speaker: Order. May I just say to the Front Benchers that we are all learning, but we should do so by setting the best example? You are meant to have two minutes, not three. Please can we help each other? Otherwise, I will have Members complaining that they did not get in.

Pat McFadden: I thank the hon. Member for her questions and the spirit in which she asked them. The truth is that it is easy for any of us to say, "Lessons must be learned," and whenever anything goes wrong, people say that. The proof is in the practice. Will it be shown in practice? That is the ultimate test for us all.

I am happy to confirm to the hon. Member that, just as I said to the Opposition spokesperson, yes, we are happy to work across the aisle on this and to consider

[Pat McFadden]

suggestions. My colleagues at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport are considering the recommendations on the memorial.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): The Minister spoke of resilience. He is aware that Northwick Park hospital in my constituency was the epicentre at the start of the pandemic, and the lack of resilience meant that nurses there had to wear bin bags to protect themselves. I noted that he spoke of Grenfell in his statement. That was fundamentally important, because this is not simply about resilience in health. In that regard, I ask him to look at the issue of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. The same RAAC that caused problems in our schools was used in many housing developments at the time. We need to be resilient to any potential disasters in that respect, too.

Pat McFadden: I echo my hon. Friend's tribute to the work of the NHS staff in his constituency. RAAC in public buildings is part of the Government's inheritance. Just because the problem has slipped down the news agenda somewhat, that does not mean that it has gone away. In time, we will have to address it to ensure that such buildings—whether housing accommodation or public buildings—are safe for people to live in, work in and be treated in.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): I congratulate the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on his new role and welcome the tone of his statement. The report is a stark reminder—if any were needed—that even the most eminent and public-spirited scientists can occasionally be wrong when groupthink affects assumptions. What can the Government do to ensure that Ministers and parliamentarians have access to the widest possible range of advice—including, where appropriate, dissenting voices—across a whole range of issues?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Member is right that groupthink is identified in the report, so it is important for the Government to have access to the widest range of advice, but no part of that, for me or the Government, will be about engaging in anti-science rhetoric or anything of that nature. A diversity of views, yes; a denial of the facts, no.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. Yesterday evening, I walked alongside the covid memorial wall and was moved by the number of hearts, each one representing someone who died from covid. I extend my sympathies to all the bereaved families who lost loved ones. Many people of all ages continue to suffer the consequences of the lack of resilience and preparedness due to long covid, so will my right hon. Friend reassure Members that those children and adults who continue to suffer with long covid—such as the young granddaughter of one of my constituents in Shipley—will not be forgotten as the inquiry continues its work?

Pat McFadden: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. Again, I echo her comments on the memorial wall. Following the election, we have a lot of new Members

in the House; if any of them find themselves with a spare hour, they could do a lot worse than go to the memorial wall, contemplate, and look at the outpouring of grief that is reflected on that wall.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right about long covid, which I mentioned in my opening remarks. When we think about the pandemic, of course we think about those who were lost and their families, but there are also people several years on from the pandemic who are still living with those consequences.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I thank the Minister for his statement. As the former Minister of Health in Northern Ireland who served during the pandemic, my thoughts and condolences are with those who were lost and those who were bereaved, and I pay a tribute of thanks to those who worked across health and social care during that trying time.

The Minister said that resilience has to be for all of us, not just for some. I ask him to ensure that all the devolved nations are equally involved. He talked about there being a consultation with the devolved nations and regions. Can I ask for it to be more than just a consultation, and for it actually to be a partnership?

Pat McFadden: I thank the hon. Member for his comments. He is quite right: this report covers all parts of the United Kingdom, and it makes a real effort to do so. The new Prime Minister also made an effort to do so in the days following the election, and one of his first priorities was to visit Northern Ireland. I agree with the hon. Member about co-operation—I think it is essential. Small differences sometimes act to the detriment of the whole effort.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend and near neighbour to his place. Like so many families, my family was affected by the death of a loved one during the pandemic, and a small heart on the national memorial wall reflects my auntie for time immemorial. Does my right hon. Friend agree that procurement during a state of emergency such as the pandemic is important, and that any fraud that occurs must be pursued ruthlessly?

Pat McFadden: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and ask that he accepts my condolences on the loss of his auntie during the pandemic. He is absolutely right to draw our attention to the procurement issues that have been highlighted—they are not specifically covered in this report, but they will be. As he will be aware, this Government will bring forward proposals for a covid fraud commissioner to recover as much as we can of the money that was lost to fraud or waste during that period.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I welcome the statement from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and was particularly pleased to hear him talk about the role of local government. Local government was instrumental in the response, and I imagine the inquiry will find that had it had a greater role, there would have been better resilience. However, as we know, local government financing is in crisis; my own local council is trying to save £100 million this year. What

reassurance can he give us that local councils will be given the funding they need to have in place the resilience we need for the future?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Member is right to praise the role of local government. My experience in Wolverhampton was that the council stepped up and did a fantastic job for local citizens during the pandemic. The financial position of local government is difficult; the financial position on a number of things is difficult. I am afraid the truth is that I cannot stand here and promise to write big cheques for everything. We did not say that we would do that during the election, and we will have to operate with a difficult—very difficult—economic inheritance. Everything that we do has to be underpinned by economic stability and financial responsibility. Tough as that is, I am afraid that we have seen the consequences of doing otherwise all too clearly in recent years.

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): In her report, Baroness Hallett said:

“The UK government’s...pandemic strategy, from 2011, was outdated and lacked adaptability. It was virtually abandoned on its first encounter with the pandemic.”

Can my right hon. Friend give me an assurance that any future strategy will be robust and will be updated regularly?

Pat McFadden: One of the things that Baroness Hallett advises in her report is that every three years there is a proper exercise to test any plan and see whether it is fit for purpose. That is an important recommendation to take away and consider. It is difficult to plan for every possible risk. This is not an easy thing to do, but it is really important to try to have the best possible systems in place between the centre of Government, between the Departments and, as we have said, between local authorities and the devolved Administrations too.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): May I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the constructive way in which this has been approached, looking both at the things that went well and at the things we need to learn? Having external scrutiny from the covid inquiry provides that lens. As the Government look at the recommendations and begin to put plans in place, some of that will build on the work that was already being done and some, as he said, will be on things that need to improve. I suggest that external scrutiny of the Government’s response is equally important. Will he ask Lord Norton’s Statutory Inquiries Committee to monitor the Government’s response to the covid inquiry?

Pat McFadden: Scrutiny is always good, and I am sure that what we do will be scrutinised. It is really important to have a proper dialogue with the public about these things, because it does no harm for us as citizens, and as Government Ministers, to have a conversation about resilience, about what we do in an emergency, and about we think about that. We do not want to frighten anybody, but it is a good thing to do, and it is a proper role for Government to have a good dialogue with the public about this.

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): I visited the wall this week, and it was a stark reminder of my own experience during the pandemic. I am an operating department

practitioner, and I worked in emergency maternity theatres during that time. From day one, there was next to no strategy. Staff were fighting over inadequate personal protective equipment. We tried to speak up, but we were not heard. We were given out-of-date masks, gowns that were ill-fitting and visors that just fell off our faces.

Even when colleagues sadly lost their lives to the disease, the chaos continued. I sat with new mothers, holding their hands because their partners were not allowed to be with them. We stood by the bedside of a colleague on life support as they lost their battle with covid. Even now, staff are traumatised all over again when people who have waited so long for treatment cannot be helped. Will this Government ensure that NHS staff can have an input in future pandemic planning, as it is we who know how best to protect our patients?

Pat McFadden: I am very, very grateful to my hon. Friend for reflecting her experience. There is nothing that I can add to the power of her words. She is absolutely right that in planning for future pandemics, we have to listen to the voice of the staff, who are the people the country will rely on if we face any kind of similar emergency in future.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Members on both sides of the House will recognise that children and young people really felt the impact of the pandemic and the lockdowns on their mental health, their learning and their social and emotional development. We all recognise that executive decisions have to be taken in an emergency to protect children and staff in schools, but I think the public were aghast that pubs and zoos opened before our schools and colleges. Will the right hon. Gentleman’s committee look at putting a proper process in place—potentially designating schools and colleges as national critical infrastructure—with this House taking a vote on any extended lockdowns of our schools and colleges if those ever need to be put in place, and with evidence taken from the Children’s Commissioner and our school and college leaders?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Lady is right to draw attention to the pandemic’s impact on education through lost learning and, as I said in my statement, the great inequality that children suffered as a result of differential access to online learning. Did they have a good wi-fi connection at home? Did they have the equipment? Was the school fully geared up to providing online learning? The answer for some children to some of those questions was yes, but the answer for a lot of children was no. It is really important in future planning that if we have to make a change, we ensure that it does not reinforce inequality but helps everyone.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I put on record my gratitude for the service of the staff at the Hospital of St Cross and of other healthcare workers and volunteers across my constituency of Rugby. Does my right hon. Friend agree that failures of state in the pandemic, and in other cases, have often been due to under-investment and an ideological suspicion of the state among some, including, regrettably, some members of the last Government? Does he agree that a party that puts service first and that believes in investing in our health service and wider Government will ensure that this country is far better ready for future crises?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend talks about failures of state, and that is the essential finding in Baroness Hallett's report: there were failures of state. He also mentions ideology; I tried in my statement to make it clear that we would not take an ideological approach and that where the last Government had done good things in response to the pandemic, we would keep them. But I also think that a change of Government after such a long period in power is an opportunity for fresh eyes—not necessarily in a partisan way, but having a different set of people to look at what has been done, keeping what is good and changing things if need be. That is one of the advantages of a change of Government, regardless of political colour, after one has been in office for so many years.

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, and I welcome his announcement of a review of national resilience. Does he agree that the many legacies of the pandemic are still very much with us, from the awful personal impacts of bereavement and long covid to the terrible public service impacts on everything from school readiness to social care systems and more? Does he agree that those impacts were worse than they need have been, as set out by Baroness Hallett yesterday? In that spirit, does he agree that this Government's work of renewal must necessarily also be a work of repair?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend talked about the legacies and, yes, they are very much still here. In terms of vulnerabilities and exposure, Baroness Hallett also mentioned the different impacts on different ethnic minority communities. When I say that resilience must be for everyone, that is also what I am talking about: it has to be for everyone, young and old, and regardless of their ethnic background. Sometimes there were vulnerabilities—particularly in the early months of the pandemic—that exposed inequalities in that regard, and that should give us all pause for thought.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and welcome him to his place. May I also thank Baroness Hallett and her team and associate myself with the comments that everyone here has made to the victims, the bereaved families and frontline workers? As my right hon. Friend said, the voices of the bereaved are at the heart of this report, and that is right. Can he assure me that when the Government are reflecting on the recommendations, that same spirit will be applied so that those insights go into the Government's response?

Pat McFadden: Baroness Hallett deserves credit for putting the voices of the bereaved up front. If anyone has looked at the actual report, they will find that before we even get into the recommendations, findings and so on, there are quotes from the bereaved that bring home exactly what these losses of loved ones meant to people, and the lasting impact of that. Here we are some four years on from the beginning of it.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I recognise the conclusion in Baroness Hallett's clear report and thank her for it. In Cornwall, our peripherality made it so much harder. Our local authority's public health test and trace was halted by the Government on

12 March when fewer than half a dozen cases were in existence in Cornwall. PPE came very slowly. Citizens were making masks and some councillors and officers drove up to Exeter to pick up some. Care homes and workers in particular were slow to get PPE. In many care homes in my constituency, there were tragic results. Will we ensure that local authority public health directors can be more involved with decision making and setting up local solutions such as test and trace?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the issue of care homes, where it was such a difficult situation throughout the pandemic. We were trying to get the right PPE to the staff. It was a huge problem during the early weeks of the pandemic. I remember raising questions about that, and it just exposed what a scramble for safety there was, particularly in the early months. She is right to urge us to learn the lessons from that.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. Mr Speaker, as you will have noticed, and as other people have referred to, the report states that there was a failure to engage appropriately with local government in preparing for the pandemic. Sadly, that failure continued throughout the pandemic. I had the dubious pleasure of being the cabinet member for health and social care in Hammersmith and Fulham council throughout the pandemic. We had to fight to close our care homes because the hospitals, under instruction from the Government, were discharging residents without testing and would not listen to us and would not stop. We had to fight to get vaccination in our local pharmacies, and we had to fight to establish a local test and trace system, which then reached 99% of people when the Government were only reaching 62%. Does my right hon. Friend agree that further stages of the inquiry, or what the Government now do, should identify and learn from the previous Government's failure to engage appropriately with the local authorities not only before but during the pandemic?

Pat McFadden: The points that my hon. Friend makes about local government are well made. As I have said, my experience in my local authority area was that I thought the local council stepped up. Sometimes the issue of who is vulnerable and where they are is much easier for a local authority to know than central Government. The spirit of co-operation that I called for in my opening statement is in the public interest and the national interest, and it is what we have to do. If we co-operate, we will be stronger.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. Friend for an important statement, and I welcome him to his new role. Like many of us in this room, during the pandemic I lost a good friend and Harlow lost an incredible councillor in Councillor Frances Mason, an incredible community champion who served her community until the very end. In my constituency, NHS staff at Princess Alexandra hospital were on the frontline during this terrible period. Their feedback to me was that the Government's initial response to covid was too slow and failed to recognise the seriousness of the issue. Does my right hon. Friend agree?

Pat McFadden: Let me offer my hon. Friend my condolences on the loss of his colleague Frances Mason. He is right to pay tribute to NHS staff. Baroness Hallett has set out a number of failings, whether speed, leadership or co-ordination. It is important that we try to learn lessons from this, and we intend to do that.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. May I associate myself with the comments made today about the bereaved and the integral role of our public sector workers throughout the pandemic? Local government workers across Paisley and Renfrewshire South were on the frontline during the pandemic. They established temporary mortuaries to bury our dead, and they looked after the children of key workers so that they could go to work. Could my right hon. Friend say a little more about how to ensure that local authorities will be treated as an integral partner in our resilience planning and the response? That is about not just their funding but the respect with which they are treated by Government. Could he assure us that, in that spirit of co-operation across the four nations, Barnett consequentials given to the Scottish Government will be passed on to their intended recipients?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the important role of local authorities, as other hon. Members have. I hope that I have made it clear in my statement and in my responses today that this must be an effort by the whole United Kingdom: central Government, devolved Governments and local authorities in every part of the country. We are stronger together.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and Baroness Hallett for her important report. On the doorsteps of Camborne, Redruth and Hayle, the anger and grief are still palpable. Where was the accountability from Ministers? Where was the leadership? Royal Cornwall hospitals NHS trust was on high alert before the pandemic hit. Is it not the case that our NHS was desperately struggling years before, through mismanagement from the Conservative party, and that lives were unnecessarily lost because of it? Careful preparedness planning and management of our NHS and social care services must be a top priority for this Government.

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is right that the NHS was in a vulnerable position before the pandemic, which is why the long-term health of the NHS is so important. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has begun that process. I have to be honest with the House: better long-term strength for the NHS will not happen overnight but it should still be an important aim for us.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his place on the Front Bench, and I thank him for his statement. He touched on victims of what has been labelled the shadow pandemic—the surge in domestic violence during lockdown. Does he agree that any lessons learned must include action to protect those for whom the instruction “stay at home” is the most dangerous they can receive?

Pat McFadden: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He highlights a very important issue that I spoke about in my opening remarks. It is an important aim of this Government to reduce violence against women and girls. I can assure him that the Minister put in charge of that will champion the cause with a passion and determination that I think and really hope will lead to results. Homes should be a place of safety. Sadly, as he rightly points out, during the pandemic that was not the case for some.

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. We all have stories from the pandemic about how we and our families were affected. That is as true for Members as it is for constituents right across the country. My family were on the other side of the England-Wales border, and my stepfather was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis during the pandemic. I was not able to visit him and provide the support to my mother that our family needed. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that we will create a joined-up national strategy? As he rightly notes, the pandemic did not pay attention to our national borders. Will he assure me that we will work very closely with scientists to ensure that there is a national strategy moving forward?

Pat McFadden: I thank my hon. Friend, who highlights the difficulties people had in not being able to visit relatives and so on. Being joined up across the UK is really important. As I said, there is no place in this kind of planning to let what are sometimes small differences get in the way. We have to work together in a co-operative way. We are stronger together.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): Module 1 of the report finds that pandemic planning did not take pre-existing health inequalities into account. In my constituency, those inequalities are particularly wide, as we saw at Grenfell Tower. I welcome the Minister's statement that the Grenfell inquiry recommendations will be incorporated into the Government's response. Does he agree that in that response we must have a far better plan for protecting the most vulnerable in our society, who are often the most disproportionately affected?

Pat McFadden: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his mention of the Grenfell inquiry. As I said, it is important to take its findings into account. It is also true that pre-existing inequalities left people more vulnerable. A national emergency like this exposes weak points and brings them into the a glaring public light, and they weaken the response of the whole country. The truth is that we have a stronger response as a country if we manage to reduce inequalities, be they on the basis of ethnic minority or of income.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. To build on the previous question, Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice UK has said that module 1 of the report does not go far enough in looking at inequality. Given the high incidence of diabetes and other long-term health conditions in the south Asian community in particular in my constituency, and the disproportionately high covid death rate among disabled, black and Asian people, what assessment has he made of the deep structural inequalities in the health

[Deirdre Costigan]

of the nation, after years of Conservative inaction, that caused us to be less prepared for covid-19, and that ultimately led to unnecessary deaths?

Pat McFadden: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. She is quite right to point out that the prevalence of a particular health condition can be higher in one part of the community. As I have said a few times today, the inequalities exposed in the pandemic made the response weaker than it might have been. If we are to be stronger and better able to handle an emergency like this in the future, we have to address those inequalities. That is not just in the interests of those it will help directly, but in the interests of all of us, because when it comes to emergencies like this, we are all in it together.

Israel and Gaza

10.30 am

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): With permission, Mr Speaker, I shall make a statement on the middle east. I was very disappointed to miss yesterday's foreign affairs debate due to the European Political Community summit, and I welcome this early opportunity to come to the House.

Last weekend, I visited Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, meeting leaders on both sides. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has also spoken to both Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas, and I have discussed the issue with colleagues from the G7 and, of course, the region. This has been a priority from day one because of the desperate situation in Gaza, and the serious risk of escalation in Lebanon in particular. I must be frank: Britain wants an immediate ceasefire. The fighting must stop. The hostages must be released. Much, much more aid must enter Gaza—Israel promised a “flood of aid” back in April, but imposes impossible and unacceptable restrictions—and there must be de-escalation on the Israeli-Lebanese border. I sincerely hope the parties will agree a ceasefire as a matter of urgency.

I have been discussing with partners the need for planning for what follows, on reconstruction, governance and security, and for reforming and empowering the Palestinian Authority, but President Biden presented his proposals nearly two months ago, so we in this new Government have not sought to cloak our position in qualifications or conditions. This horror must end now.

My visit brought home the conflict's appalling impact. I met the families of those murdered and taken hostage so cruelly by Hamas, now separated from their loved ones for so long. I told them that the UK would continue to push for the immediate release of all hostages. I also met Palestinians displaced by settlers. Settlement expansion and settler violence have reached record levels. The Israeli Government have seized more of the west bank in 2024 than in the past 20 years. That is completely unacceptable. This Government will challenge those who undermine a two-state solution.

Finally, I met aid workers from the United Nations agencies operating in Gaza. More aid workers have been killed in Gaza than in every other conflict globally combined this year. Those who risk their life to save others are heroes. With journalists banned from entering, aid agencies are a vital source of information from the Gaza strip, and their reports are devastating: almost 40,000 killed, mothers so malnourished that they cannot produce milk for their babies, rivers of sewage in the streets, a surge in disease among children—with 40 times the normal rate of diarrhoea, and with polio now detected—and looting; one aid truck driver was killed only yesterday. I announced on my visit new funding for field hospitals run by UK-Med, which has treated more than 60,000 Gazans since the conflict began.

Humanitarian aid is a moral necessity in the face of such a catastrophe, and it is aid agencies that ensure that UK support reaches civilians on the ground. UNRWA is absolutely central to those efforts; no other agency can deliver aid on the scale needed. It is already feeding over half of Gaza's population. It will be vital for future

reconstruction, and it provides critical services to Palestinian refugees in the region. I was appalled by the allegations that UNRWA staff were involved in the 7 October attacks, but the UN took those allegations seriously. I have spoken to UN Secretary-General Guterres and Commissioner-General Lazzarini. Following Catherine Colonna's independent review, we are reassured that UNRWA is ensuring that it meets the highest standards of neutrality and is strengthening its procedures, including on vetting.

UNRWA has acted. Partners such as Japan, the European Union and Norway have also now acted, and this Government will act too. I can confirm to the House that we are overturning the suspension of UNRWA funding. Britain will provide £21 million in new funds, with some directed at supporting the management reforms recommended by the Colonna review. UNRWA supports more than 5.5 million Palestinians, and almost 200 of its staff have died in this conflict. I thank the agency for its lifesaving work.

As we look for a pathway out of the wider crisis, I am conscious of this conflict's complexities and am determined to listen to all sides. I approach every decision I must take carefully. Our overarching goal is clear: a viable and sovereign Palestinian state, alongside a safe and secure Israel. There is no way out of this crisis without a route to both Palestinians and Israelis enjoying security, justice and opportunity in lands that they can call their own. We are committed to playing a full diplomatic role in a renewed peace process, and to contributing to that process by recognising a Palestinian state at a time determined by us, not anyone else.

I know that other aspects of this crisis are of great interest to the House, including the Government's assessment of Israel's compliance with international humanitarian law in Gaza, the investigation by the International Criminal Court, and what further measures might help to deter malign activity by the Iranian regime. Let me reassure the House that I take those issues extremely seriously. Our commitment to international law is clear, and we are following the necessary processes. As soon as I took office, I tasked officials with a comprehensive review of Israel's compliance with international humanitarian law, and that process is now under way. I will update the House again once the process is complete.

Twenty-four years ago, just weeks after I first joined the House, President Clinton hosted the Camp David summit—a reminder that this tragedy has lasted far too long. There are those in this House who, like me, represent constituents who are convinced that the world does not understand Israel's predicament. To them I say that Israel is in a tough neighbourhood and is threatened by those who want it annihilated. There is no equivalence between Israel's democratic Government and Hamas, a terrorist organisation responsible for an act of barbarism on 7 October that sought to kill countless Israelis and provoke wider conflict with Palestinians. I fully supported the UK's role in defending Israel when Iran launched its unprecedented attack, and I utterly condemn the Houthi attack on Tel Aviv overnight.

There are also those who, like me, represent constituents who are convinced that the world does not understand the depth of Palestinian suffering. To them I say that civilians in Gaza are trapped in hell on earth. The

Palestinian people have been in purgatory for decades, and have been denied the state that is their inalienable right.

As Foreign Secretary, I understand both those perspectives. I recognise the pain and anguish felt on all sides. It makes me only more determined to do all I can in this office to advance the cause of peace. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Edward Leigh): I call the Opposition spokesman.

10.38 am

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): May I start by welcoming the Secretary of State and his team to their places? They take up their roles in one of the greatest offices of state, which is committed to shaping the future and the safety of our country. That is, after all, the foremost duty of our Government.

I take this opportunity to put on record my thanks to Lord Cameron, Lord Ahmad and, of course, the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), for their steadfast determination to end this conflict, and for the humanity that they displayed when faced with a situation of untold horror. I also thank them for keeping me—in my previous role as Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee—and both Opposition Front Benches fully updated. I am sure that the current Government will continue with that collaborative approach.

I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement, although I cannot say that it prepared me fully to find myself on the Front Bench on a Friday morning. He will know the extensive work that we undertook while in government, following the horrific terrorist attack suffered by Israel on 7 October and the crimes against humanity suffered by her people. I welcome his visit to the region. Israel did suffer an appalling terrorist attack—the deadliest in its history. As we said from the outset, Israel has the right to defend itself in accordance with international humanitarian law, and we must remove Hamas's capacity to launch attacks against Israel.

As the right hon. Gentleman rightly set out, the situation in Gaza is desperate. Too many Palestinian civilians have been killed. We continue to see strikes on humanitarian infrastructure and the humanitarian situation is unforgivable. The index on famine states that Gaza is now in just that: full famine. I saw this when I went on my own visit to the Egyptian border with Gaza and met families who had had to be evacuated due to the severity of the harm caused to them. We need an immediate end to the fighting and to secure the release of the hostages, whose families continue to suffer unbearable torment on a daily basis, so will the right hon. Gentleman please provide an update to the House on reassurances he has received on the safety of the hostages?

On aid, in his meetings has the Foreign Secretary secured any reassurances to increase the number of trucks going into Gaza? Seventy-odd a day is just not enough. In government, we did everything we could to urge Israel to let more humanitarian aid into Gaza and open more crossings, including through Rafah, and we trebled our own aid commitment within the last financial

[Alicia Kearns]

year, doing everything we could to get aid there by land, sea or air. We had success in getting the Ashdod port open, as well as Kerem Shalom, and helped get 11 airdrops into Gaza. The field hospital provided by UK aid funding to UK-Med has treated thousands of patients. We also supported and helped to set up a maritime aid corridor to Gaza. The right hon. Gentleman announced today the return of funding to UNRWA. Can he please advise the House on the timeline for that, and provide assurances that taxpayers' funding will be directed with due regard?

Only an end to the fighting will enable a significant scaling up of humanitarian aid. The right hon. Gentleman rightly stated that Biden set forward a proposal backed by Israel and the UN Security Council to end the hostilities. What action is he taking to move that proposal forward? Can he also provide us with any reassurances he has secured in his meetings with Netanyahu? He rightly raised the case of extremist settlers; we were one of the first Governments to put in place sanctions against some of them. Can he assure us that he raised this issue with the Israeli Government, and whether more sanctions will be forthcoming?

The risk of escalation remains high, particularly with Hezbollah in Lebanon, so can I please ask whether his Department assesses any change in Iranian intent, activities or funding following the sham election of the Iranian President? When they sat on the Opposition Benches, both the right hon. Gentleman and the now Home Secretary were crystal clear that, were they in government, they would proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, so can we please now have the timing for this proscription?

We all want to see an end to this devastating situation, which threatens the stability and security of so many. As His Majesty's loyal Opposition, our priority will be to work with the Government, but also to challenge and scrutinise them as needed. Ultimately, we can assure the Government that we will always work in the national interest because it is foreign policy that keeps our people safe at home, and that is our foremost duty.

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the hon. Member for her remarks and for her work previously on the Foreign Affairs Committee, in which she was a stalwart champion for international humanitarian law. She raised these issues frequently in the House, challenging both sides on the issues she thought were important, and I am pleased to see her elevated to this position. I am grateful for the work that I was able to do with the former Foreign Secretary, Lord Cameron, and the way in which he kept us—in opposition, in those days—up to date with what was happening in our national interests. I also thank the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), for all his work when he was in office, particularly on the issue of development.

The hon. Member asked me about the safety of the hostages. That is of primary concern. Of course, we were engaged in detailed conversation with Prime Minister Netanyahu on what support we can offer to assist in the business of getting those hostages out. I met hostage families—many of them UK hostage families—to discuss

the plight of those hostages. They remain paramount in the Government's mind as we head, I hope, towards the ceasefire that we all want.

The hon. Member was right to centre her remarks on the question of aid. Seventy trucks a day, when we know there should be 500, is not enough. The whole House recognises the word “flood”, and we were told in April that Gaza would be flooded with aid. Seventy trucks is nowhere near enough. As a consequence, we hear stories of disease—now including polio—setting in, which is horrific and troubles us all deeply.

Let me reassure the hon. Member that we allocated an extra £5.5 million to support UK-Med in Gaza because those field sites are so important against a backdrop in which hospitals and medical facilities have been pummelled and bombed into the ground. She is right to focus on the Biden plan, which we would like to see adopted in the next few days. The plan dominated discussion with G7 Foreign Ministers in Washington DC last week and the conversations I have had with Arab partners, and all of us want to see the deal done. I sincerely hope that we get to that point by the end of the month.

There is a sticking point with prisoner release as well as with hostage release: what happens on the day after? Israel's security is paramount. Hamas cannot remain in charge of Gaza. But equally, the Israel Defence Forces cannot remain situated in Gaza. There has to be a new paradigm. It will involve, I suspect, Arab partners and others who can give security guarantees to Israel. It is a complicated picture. We have to work at pace on what comes afterwards.

The hon. Member is right to raise the terrible situation on the west bank. It was important for me to meet the new Prime Minister on the west bank to discuss the finances that have been withdrawn and the febrile situation we saw against a backdrop of an unbelievable expansion, which breaches international law that the House stands by. I press the Israeli Prime Minister on that issue greatly. We are of course looking closely at those issues.

On the role that Iran plays in sponsoring Hamas, sponsoring Hezbollah and engaging in malign activity, we keep a close eye. I stand by what I said at the Dispatch Box when I was Opposition spokesman on these matters, and I will work over the coming months to review the context of terrorist activity and state threats with the Home Secretary.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his position. What discussions has he had on a deal to secure the release of the hostages? Can he inform the House of the welfare of the remaining hostages?

Mr Lammy: It has now been many months indeed, and it is sadly possible that some of the hostages are no longer alive—there are reports that some have lost their lives. I have spoken to hostage families, aware that, in this case, their sons may no longer be with us. Of course, like any parent, they want the body returned. There are also hostages still in tunnels, and their parents, brothers, sisters and families are unaware of their health at this point in time. We will continue to do all we can, working with the Israeli authorities and with nations,

such as Qatar, that, importantly, are able to speak to Hamas in a way that this Government cannot, in order to ensure their release.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I welcome the Foreign Secretary to his place.

The situation in Gaza is, frankly, soul shattering. It has been nearly 300 days, and the death toll stands at 38,000, with the vast majority of those killed being women and children. Only three days ago, 22 people lost their lives in a strike on a UN-run school—the fifth attack on or near a school in the last eight days. Those who survive the bombings are at severe risk of disease and malnutrition, against the backdrop of a medical system that has been completely decimated. I warmly welcome the restoration of funding to UNRWA as a backbone of Gazan society, but the number of deaths will only increase exponentially now that polio has been found—*The Lancet* estimates that the number might reach 186,000.

This has to end now. We need an immediate ceasefire, but we also need the hostages out and the aid in. It is also right that we should start thinking about not just the next day, but how we stop this ever happening again. There is only one viable answer, which is a two-state solution. That is our north star, and it is the keystone to stability in the region.

I have to express disappointment that the Foreign Secretary refuses to pull the lever that would best signify our commitment to a two-state solution, which is to recognise the Palestinian state on 1967 borders. Ireland, Spain and Norway did it in May. Will he consider it? If not, why not? Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel actively rejects a Palestinian state, and we know that the fact a Palestinian state does not exist is Hamas's rallying cry. We must prove them wrong, so what is the Foreign Secretary doing to ensure that it happens?

The ICC has issued arrest warrants for Netanyahu, Gallant and Hamas leaders, but there is confusion about the Foreign Secretary's position on the block. Will he clarify that for the House today? Finally, will he consider meeting me so that we can work together across the House to advance the cause of an immediate ceasefire and, most importantly, an enduring peace and a two-state solution?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the hon. Lady not just for her remarks, but for how she took up these issues in the last Parliament, which I am sure she will continue in this Parliament. We are all reminded of her family's plight in Gaza, particularly in those early months. I welcome her support for restoring funding to UNRWA. Many of our allies made that decision months ago, back in April and May, and I am sorry that it has taken a change of Government to look at it clearly and reach this point. She is absolutely right to raise the huge concern about polio now taking hold in Gaza, alongside the tremendous growth in respiratory disease and diarrhoea, which can both lead to death if untreated.

There is no confusion on this party's position on Palestinian recognition. We are committed to Palestinian recognition. We hope to work with partners to achieve that, when the circumstances are right. I say to the hon. Lady that it is my sincere hope that the Biden plan is adopted in the coming weeks, and that we get the immediate ceasefire that this party has been calling

for—it is now a good almost eight months since we have been calling for an immediate ceasefire. Under those circumstances we can work with others, because Palestinian recognition is not the end, in and of itself; it is actually a two-state solution that is the end that we want to achieve.

The hon. Lady is right that the chief prosecutor at the ICC has made his intention clear in relation to arrest warrants, but she will know that there are further hearings to determine whether they will actually be issued. We have been two weeks in office. It is right that I allow Treasury solicitors, lawyers and the Attorney General to assist me in any judgments that we have to make in relation to that. I said in my statement that there is a process; it is a quasi-legal process that must be followed with all integrity, and I intend to do that.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement. It is a real relief, particularly his description of the hell hole that is Gaza. Many of my constituents in Rochdale feel deeply appalled by the ongoing deaths and suffering of the Palestinian people in Gaza, but they are also deeply appalled by the rising tide of settler violence and expansion in the west bank. Many of them are desperate for peace in the region, as are many of us in this House today. What specific steps is the Foreign Secretary taking to actively promote and uphold the independence of the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice?

Mr Lammy: I welcome my hon. Friend to his place. It is great to see him here—I know he long held an ambition to move from journalism to this House. We are clear that the International Criminal Court is the primary international institution for investigating and prosecuting the most serious international crimes. We fully respect the rules-based order and the ICC's independence and impartiality. We are aware that the ICJ is likely to issue an advisory opinion shortly and we will consider it very carefully.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I welcome the right hon. Member to his role. Members on both sides of the House want to see critical aid getting through where it is needed, but I am concerned by the Government's decision to resume funding to UNRWA. UNRWA schools have been repeatedly used by terrorists both to store weapons and to launch attacks, and over 100 UNRWA staff have had links to terrorist groups in the region. Is the right hon. Gentleman able to give UK taxpayers an unequivocal assurance that Hamas have no links to UNRWA in Gaza?

Mr Lammy: I had the pleasure of meeting Catherine Colonna in her role as the Foreign Secretary of France. She is a woman of tremendous capability and integrity. She looked at these issues in depth, she reported and all our allies have continued to fund UNRWA. She did make a series of recommendations. That is why I spoke to the UN Secretary-General and to Commissioner-General Lazzarini, who is responsible for UNRWA, to ensure that they are implementing the action plan that came out as a consequence of that review. In finding the money available for UNRWA and restoring its funding, I have also ensured that there is £1 million of funding to support the implementation of those recommendations.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his work on moving Government policy on this issue and for putting the situation in Gaza at the top of his agenda. In particular, I commend the fact that he and the Prime Minister have consistently called for international law to be followed in the conflict. When will he publish the Government's assessment of whether any party has breached international law since 7 October and what the consequences of any such breaches should be?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. I know that he has championed the Palestinian cause and the Palestinian people in this House for many, many years. He pushes me on an important subject. May I say to him—he is an esteemed lawyer, so he understands why I am choosing my words carefully—that this is a quasi-legal process and it is important that I follow the actions in the appropriate way, with all probity and integrity? I will consider those assessments when they are made available to me. I instigated a process on my first day in office. I am supported in that by our Attorney General, and I hope to be able to make my views known with full accountability and transparency.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I welcome the Foreign Secretary to his place and I welcome the decision to restore UNRWA funding and the overall change of tone from his predecessors on this issue. The Liberal Democrats have long called for arms sales to Israel to be suspended while there are questions over its human rights record. As shadow Foreign Secretary, he called on the Conservative Government to publish the legal advice that they had received on this matter. Will he commit to doing so now?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Lady will have heard what was just said to my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Fulham—[*Interruption.*] The boundaries have changed and he is now my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter)—Hammersmith has gone more upmarket! [*Interruption.*] Members will understand that, as the Member for Tottenham, I think that I can get away with that.

In all seriousness, because this is a very serious point, I will seek to make my decision with full accountability and transparency.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's announcement on UNRWA, whose work I know well. It saves lives in the face of unbearable horror, and we must be careful about believing any misinformation about its work.

Earlier this year, in one of the only hospitals still functioning in Gaza, I met a mother whose child had been injured by an Israeli airstrike. With almost 40,000 killed, she asked me to tell the world what was being done to the Palestinians of Gaza. She assumed that we did not know, because if we knew, surely we would have acted to stop it. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that, as well as an immediate and lasting ceasefire, accountability is essential in upholding international law, and that the International Criminal Court and International Court of Justice are doing vital work on Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories that must be supported and acted on? Will he meet me to discuss those issues?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. Many in this House will know of her considerable work and the work of her colleagues on behalf of those suffering in Gaza over the past few months. They will also know just how hard and unbearable it has been for many, many of those working on the ground.

My hon. Friend makes an important statement about the independence of the work of the ICC and the ICJ. I believe in the separation of powers, as I think do all democrats in this House. It is for judges and the judiciary to have the time to reflect and make their considerations and for politicians to step back and respect them in that process. That is the case in our own country and it must be the case in international courts of law. Of course I will meet my hon. Friend and other colleagues and keep them updated.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I welcome the Foreign Secretary and his team to their places. I also welcome the statement, in particular the emphasis on the need for an immediate ceasefire, for the immediate release of all hostages and for a stop to settler violence and expansion in the west bank. I welcome the resumption of funding to UNRWA.

I add my voice to the calls that a couple of hon. Members have made for the Foreign Secretary to commit to publishing the comprehensive review of Israel's compliance or non-compliance with international humanitarian law, as soon as officials have completed it. In the meantime, will he apply the precautionary principle and act to stop all UK arms exports to Israel, given the already widespread evidence of considerable breaches of international law?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her remarks; I welcome her, the Green party's representative for North Herefordshire, to the House.

As I said in my remarks, this is one of the toughest neighbourhoods in the world. Israel is surrounded by people who would see its annihilation—it is being attacked by the Houthis, Hezbollah are firing missiles and Hamas want to wipe it off the map. For those reasons, it would not be right to have a blanket ban between our countries and Israel; what is right is for me to consider in the normal way the issues in relation to offensive weapons in Gaza, following the quasi-judicial process that I have outlined.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his place and congratulate him, on behalf of my constituents in Warwick and Leamington, on giving priority to this issue. I commend him for today's announcement. The restoration of funding to UNRWA is long overdue; as we have heard, many other nations did this many months ago. Given its importance in the supply of 60% of aid and 50% of food into Gaza, the 70 trucks a day we have heard about are way insufficient—an estimated 500 are needed.

My right hon. Friend may be aware of the Oxfam report showing that the IDF has almost systematically weaponised water in Gaza; there has been a 94% reduction in the water supply, to just five litres per person per day. My right hon. Friend spoke about dysentery and polio. What does he believe the UK can do to assist the restoration of the water supply in Gaza?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's continued championing of these issues. He is right to mention the importance of water. I think it is now half a million people who are at category 5—the definition that constitutes starvation and famine—and in large part that is due to there being no access to clean water. He knows of the scenes of sewage getting into the system. The lack of clean water is a desperate situation. In the end, what we need is a ceasefire, because only with a ceasefire can reconstruction work begin.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): My right hon. Friend was absolutely right to speak of the need for an immediate ceasefire and the need to restore funding to UNRWA. I welcome both those moves. He also spoke of the Government's needing to make an assessment of Israeli compliance with international humanitarian law in Gaza, but the question then arises: after that assessment has been made, what is going to happen? He said in his statement that the horror must end now, and indeed it must, but he has just explained to the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns) that to cease supplying arms to Israel would cause, as he sees it, a greater problem. What is the leverage that he has? If the horror must end now, and it must, then this Government must be able to take some actions once they have reviewed and received the legal assessment that he has called for. I am prepared to give him time to get that assessment, but I want to know what he is going to do once he has got it.

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is very experienced, experienced enough to know that the minute any individual describes their leverage, that leverage is lost. Therefore, if he will forgive me, I will not share that at the Dispatch Box at this stage. However, the passion that lies behind his question is a concern that, for nine months, Foreign Secretaries have stood at this Dispatch Box and said that the aid must get in and that we must follow international humanitarian law—and now, months later, there is a new Foreign Secretary at the Dispatch Box and there are still serious concerns about international humanitarian law and the aid has simply not got in in the quantities needed. He shares my frustration, and it was frustration indeed that I shared with leaders in Israel.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Edward Leigh): I call Emily Darlington.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker; I was not bobbing, but I am happy to ask a question. Are you sure it was me you were calling on?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Edward Leigh): Please go ahead. The Clerks are struggling a bit with new Members.

Emily Darlington: I congratulate my right hon. Friend and his entire team on their positions, and thank him for the restoration of funding to UNRWA. As someone who has worked in international development, I have seen the vital work those organisations play, and in particular those organisations under the United Nations umbrella, because they are where we can come together as an international force. Does he agree that the solutions in the Israel-Palestine conflict are not necessarily solutions here in Parliament, but solutions that we will have to work with our international partners to build?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend has got off to a good start. She is right, first, because we have seen so many aid workers lose their lives and, secondly, because her emphasis on the partnerships that we have to strike with allies across the world is essential if we are to see the change that we need, particularly in Gaza but also in the Occupied Territories.

Gregor Poynton (Livingston) (Lab): It is very welcome to see the Secretary of State and his team on the Front Bench as Britain's voice in the world. That has a particular significance for me, as one of my predecessors in the Livingston constituency was Robin Cook. I know Robin Cook's time in office and his thinking did much to inform the Secretary of State's approach to his new role. This statement is incredibly welcome, although it set out the horrific situation on the ground in Gaza. Does the Secretary of State agree that there is no peace without a two-state solution, and that opposing a two-state solution is wrong for both Israelis and the Palestinian people?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful to have been asked a question by the new occupant of Robin Cook's seat. He was a stalwart and a champion of this cause. I was grateful to come into this House when he was serving as Foreign Secretary, and in an article I wrote recently in *Foreign Affairs* I paid tribute to his work over many years.

The vote by the Knesset yesterday was hugely disappointing. We believe passionately in two states. I say to those who reject two states, "If you are a proponent of one state, you have to explain how everyone enjoys equality under the law. And if you are a proponent of no state, you are effectively suggesting that occupation continues." That is unacceptable, I would have thought, to all Members of this House.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on becoming Foreign Secretary, and I welcome his statement outlining the restoration of UNRWA funding, for which Labour Members have been calling for a long time. He will remember that many of us have raised the issue of humanitarian aid. We met many aid organisations throughout the last Parliament, including Islamic Relief, which is based in my constituency, who told me, two days after 7 October, the harrowing story of losing contact with all their staff on the ground. We know that blockades and restrictions are key issues, so will he outline how they will be lifted so that urgent aid can get to the people who need it?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question, and may I congratulate her on her remarkable speech at the beginning of the debate on the Address? She has also raised these issues before. We certainly share a Christian faith and have talked about our deep concern as people of faith, and I pay tribute to Islamic Relief for its work. One issue is that Rafah is now closed, and it needs to reopen. Another issue is not just the trucks getting across but the distribution once they are there. Very sadly, the picture that is now being painted is one of lawlessness in Gaza: widespread looting from the trucks that get across, and, very sadly, a driver losing his life yesterday. Her question is, as the people of Vauxhall and Camberwell Green would say, on point.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his position and the restoration of funding to UNRWA. It is good to see that when we talked about change at the election, we also meant in the international approach of the Government. I know that he will share the House's revulsion at the ongoing horror faced by hostages, their families and the innocent civilians in Gaza facing this enduring crisis. That revulsion is shared by many people in my Peterborough constituency. It is a privilege to be a voice for them in calling for a ceasefire, the release of hostages, peace and a complete solution to recognise Palestine. What message would he send to constituents of mine—who have for too long heard discussions about a two-state solution—to say that this time, with a new Government, we have a new approach to deal with the immediate crisis and achieve the recognition of Palestine?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend knows that I know Peterborough very well, having spent seven years of my life in that great cathedral city. I have knocked on doors with him and know that this is an issue of great concern there. We are absolutely committed to the two-state solution. The global community has, for too many years, talked about it but not acted, and I recognise that there is now almost tremendous cynicism when that phrase is used, but there is no way out of this crisis without a plan for afterwards. That plan must, of course, guarantee the security of Israel, but the Palestinian cause is a just cause, and we must work with Arab partners and build up the Palestinian Authority. I spoke to them at length about what more we can do to assist them with the reforms that they need to make so that we can realise that. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to put on record our deep concern for the hostages, their families and their plight. If they were released, we could end this now.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend to his position as the first Labour Foreign Secretary for 14 years, which is very welcome. Does he agree that the UK's extensive, long-standing diplomatic, economic, cultural and defence ties with the Gulf Arab and other middle eastern Governments mean that we are better placed to bring our influence to bear and work in co-operation with our international partners, in order to achieve a two-state solution that ensures a safe and secure Israel and a viable, sovereign and—one day, we hope—prosperous Palestinian state? Can he also assure me that all will be done to enable British organisations and companies to play their fullest role in rebuilding Gaza's infrastructure and economy?

Mr Lammy: I say to my hon. Friend, the new Member for Rugby, that that is a very good question. That is why in opposition, I spent so much time with partners in the region, talking to them about the future. All of them want to be engaged, want peace and want to move towards a process of normalisation, but they are all crystal clear that that cannot happen by ignoring the plight of the Palestinian people, or without setting up a

road map to two states. They are not prepared to reconstruct Gaza for this to happen yet again in 25 years' time, so we have to work with them. They play a critical role, but we must now get that immediate ceasefire.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary and his team to their places, and strongly welcome the decision announced today to restore funding for UNRWA, which will be recognised by many people in south Birmingham as an important step—among many others—towards ending the horror that we see today in Gaza. The Israeli Government's decision to end the legal routes for Palestinians to work in Israel has played an important role in the entrenchment of poverty and political instability in the west bank, alongside the illegal settlements programme. Will the Foreign Secretary make representations on this important matter, recognising that both the Israeli Histadrut and the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions, as pillars of civil society in both nations, have an important role to play in the establishment of a lasting peace?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question, which gives me an opportunity to talk about what I saw on the west bank. The situation is febrile—it is anxious. There is tremendous hardship because of the withdrawal of those funds. It is phenomenally tense, and against that backdrop, people are watching their land being taken from them before their eyes. As such, the representations that my hon. Friend has asked me to make are absolutely the representations I made when I spoke to the leadership in Israel, because this simply cannot continue, and we must act to stop it.

Dan Tomlinson (Chipping Barnet) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary and the whole Front-Bench team to their place—it is wonderful to see. I also welcome the visit that the Foreign Secretary made to the middle east, and thank him for the time he spent visiting the families of the hostages who have been held in Gaza for nine months now. I ask him to commit to do everything he can to ensure those hostages are released immediately.

Mr Lammy: I welcome my hon. Friend and north London colleague to his seat. He represents a part of the country with a significant Jewish population; in my own constituency, I am very proud of the Stamford Hill area of Tottenham, which is also a historic home of the Jewish population. They are hugely concerned about the plight of hostages, and they worry that the discussion about hostages has fallen off the lips of so many people. They worry that the horrors of 7 October have been forgotten against the backdrop of this unfolding crisis and this war, and I want to reassure them and my hon. Friend that they have not been forgotten. The British Government—and this is a cross-party issue—are working very closely with the Israelis and others to see the hostages released.

Debate on the Address

[3RD DAY]

Debate resumed (Order, 18 July).

Question again proposed,

That an humble Address be presented to His Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

Planning, the Green Belt and Rural Affairs

11.25 am

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner): It is an honour to open today's King's Speech debate on behalf of His Majesty's Government, and it is the honour of my life to address the House for the first time as the Deputy Prime Minister.

We have been given a mandate by the British people to turn the page on 14 years of chaos and start the new chapter that they deserve. That began with this week's King's Speech, but it is not the words that we offer; it is the action. I know at first hand how Government can change lives for the better. I say that not as a politician, but as someone whose life was changed for the better by the last Labour Government, and I am determined to do the same for others. That is why we have set out a bold vision to smash the class ceiling, to get Britain building, and to improve the quality and standard of life for everyone everywhere across our country.

Let me give a huge welcome to all the new Members on the Government Benches, who are crucial in delivering that programme of national renewal. I also extend a welcome to new Opposition Members. We will disagree on much, I am sure, but we all share the honour and privilege of representing those who sent us here, so I wish the very best to all hon. Members making their maiden speech today.

Just over nine years ago, when I made my maiden speech on behalf of the people of Ashton-under-Lyne, I pledged that I would always tell it as it is, and I think that is one promise I have kept. Now I intend to fulfil another, because we promise the people of this country that we will serve their interests and not ours. That starts with us having the honesty to say that we will not be able to put right the mess of the past 14 years immediately. But after just two weeks, we have already made a difference by creating a national wealth fund to grow our economy; scrapping the failed Rwanda plan; lifting the near-decade-long ban on onshore wind; starting work on the 40,000 extra NHS appointments that people need each week, and on getting the 700,000 urgent dental appointments up and running; and resuming and expanding teacher recruitment. In my Department, newly renamed the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, we will replace slogans with substance.

We are getting back to the real work of governing in the national interest. We have already taken early steps to unblock our planning system, creating a new taskforce

to accelerate progress on stalled housing sites in our country, beginning with four that alone could deliver more than 14,000 of the homes that Britain so desperately needs. The housing crisis is holding Britain back. Too many families face soaring mortgage payments, or sky-high rents for damp, unsafe homes, and there are leaseholders who are trapped, facing eye-watering charges with no way out. All this has been fuelled by the chronic housing shortage, after the last Government failed to meet their housing targets every single year. Housing completions are now set to hit their lowest level since world war two.

We know we have a mountain to climb. That is why we are already taking the first steps, starting with an overhaul of our planning system—a reform that will help us build the homes we need and speed up provision of the infrastructure to support them. We are committed not just to an ambitious target for overall housing building, but to building the biggest wave of social and affordable housing for a generation. That is a promise that we will bring back with meaningful housing targets.

It is right that local people have a say on what kind of houses are built and where, because our aim is not to build big, but to build well. We will work with local government to plan new housing in the best possible places, with the infrastructure, public services and green spaces they need. Social housing must be there when people need it, and affordable housing to own should be there when they want it.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): I congratulate the Deputy Prime Minister on her new role. My local councils in South Staffordshire and Dudley have worked hard to prepare local plans that provide the housing they have assessed that the local community needs, while also protecting key green belt. Will the right hon. Lady really tear up plans that have been adopted, or that are in the formal process of being adopted, if her bureaucrats feel that their assessment is better than the local council's?

Angela Rayner: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's comments, and I congratulate the local authorities that have those local plans. If those plans are adopted, that is exactly what we want to see; we want to see more local plans, and more engagement with local leaders, so that we can build the houses that people want in their areas, working together with them. The hon. Gentleman talked about the green belt, but we have been very clear on the grey belt as well. We will not get the housing we need just from brownfield sites, although brownfield will be first. We will work with local leaders, because the mandate the British people gave us at this election was to get the housing that Britain needs. I am afraid that the last Tory Government did not take this issue on but failed people, and we have a chronic housing shortage. Everyone should have a place to call home, and we will legislate to make that happen.

Our renters' rights Bill will give protection and security to tenants, as well as responsible landlords, levelling the playing field. We will plug the gaps left by the last Government's Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024, tackling unregulated and unaffordable ground rents and strengthening leaseholders' rights. Our planning and infrastructure Bill will provide the extra homes we need, unblock stalled development sites and unveil the next generation of new towns.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): My constituency has vast swathes of high-risk flood area—zones 2 and 3—and we see flooding every year; we saw it most notably in 2014, but also in January. Will the right hon. Lady's planning reforms protect areas at high risk of flooding, so that they are not built on, making our flooding worse?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Edward Leigh): Order. We have a lot of speakers to get through, including some maiden speakers, so I urge Front Benchers to make shorter speeches and take fewer interventions. Otherwise, we are not going to get through these maiden speakers.

Angela Rayner: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will take your advice, and I apologise to Members for the fact that I will not take more interventions.

We have to grapple with these issues and work with those in these areas. Obviously, flooding has been a major issue, and the Government will look at it. It is devastating to people when their homes are flooded, and we have to look at these things in the round when looking at planning.

We will unveil the next generation of new towns, and we will learn the lessons of the past to create safe and beautiful homes and the sustainable green communities of the future. This Government are fully committed to the 13 targets set under the Environment Act 2021, and we will work closely with my right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary to ensure that we protect the environment and nature. We will work with local leaders to ensure that these towns meet our gold standard of having 40% genuinely affordable housing, with homes for social rent a priority. In some places, we will extend urban areas and regenerate them so that everyone benefits from better public transport and extra public services. We are building not just homes but communities.

Our first port of call will be brownfield land. Previously used land will be developed first wherever possible and those sites will be fast-tracked, but brownfield development alone will not meet the country's increasing urgent need. The green belt was designed for England in the middle of the 20th century. It is right to keep that principle but make it relevant for today. That is why we will release lower-quality grey-belt sites, disused car parks and garages, and ugly wasteland to meet the needs of 2024. Our golden rules will require developers to enhance local nature and public access to green spaces and provide the local services for communities' everyday needs, such as schools and GP surgeries.

We will also reverse the damaging changes that the previous Government made last December. While they backtracked in the face of vested interests and scrapped mandatory housing targets, Labour will govern in the national interest and take the tough choices to get Britain building. We will do so under an updated national planning policy framework, which we will have by the end of this month, because the current system just is not working, either for housing at a local level or for projects at a national level. These are projects such as data centres, labs and research sites, which should unleash a modern economy, not to mention large-scale projects that help improve the environment.

Onshore wind is the cheapest form of electricity going, but planning policy has effectively banned it for nearly a decade. We are starting it up again, and we will

go further. As part of our plan for cheaper household bills and achieving net zero, we are taking the brakes off the planning system. In the first three months of this year, just a fifth of major applications were determined within the 13-week period. As for nationally significant infrastructure, the average time for consent is now more than four years, compared to two and a half years as recently as 2021.

Our Bill will speed up and streamline the process from start to finish. It will modernise planning committees and increase the capacity of our local planning authorities. By reforming compulsory purchase, it will support land assembly for development in the public interest. We will unblock new grid connections, roads, railways and reservoirs—game-changing reforms for national renewal.

The leaders of our communities are best placed to take forward that mission, and I was delighted to invite our mayors to Downing Street with the Prime Minister, days into a Labour Government. They represent our biggest cities and our most beautiful countryside, and I know only too well the diverse challenges that our people need to overcome. There are now so many Labour mayors that I have lost count of how many we have. I also noted the positive words from Ben Houchen about the constructive engagement that local leaders have already experienced under this new Government. Along with their local citizens, we will give them a bigger say on how to transform their neighbourhoods and high streets. We will hand them the powers to transform their regions, so that they become the best places for people to live, work and enjoy.

We are under no illusion about the hard yards needed to repair the economic and social damage that the last Government left behind. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has said, we have the worst inheritance since the second world war. Back then, it was Labour that rebuilt Britain from the rubble of war, creating the NHS, the welfare state and council homes for our returning heroes. It will be a Labour Government who now rebuild Britain once again.

11.38 am

Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): It is a delight to be back at the Dispatch Box, and I have been looking forward to speaking opposite the right hon. Lady for a very long time. She and I have never really met, and certainly never spoken to each other, despite being in this House together for seven years. We have some things in common, although not much. We were both born in 1980, although I am older and wiser than she is. People often think we are both much younger than we really are, because we have got such great skin and good hair, and we are both known as being quite feisty. I am really pleased to be able to congratulate her on her elevation to Secretary of State and Deputy Prime Minister. This is a phenomenal achievement.

She will be a great inspiration to young people, particularly young women, in many communities across the country. That is a wonderful thing. That is the sort of Britain we are: where people from all walks of life can grow up and reach the top. It is an extraordinary story, dare I say it, of Conservative success. Because unlike me, the right hon. Lady grew up under a Conservative Government, with a welfare state that provided a safety net, a strong economy and opportunity. I mostly grew

up in Nigeria, under a socialist military Government, who used a lot of the rhetoric that I heard her promote when she was sitting on the Opposition Benches. She may not credit the Conservatives for what she has achieved, but we will take some of the credit anyway.

I would like to extend a very warm welcome to the right hon. Lady on her first outing as a Minister in the Chamber, because it will only be downhill from here. The thing is, I have been a Secretary of State, and after five years as a Minister one learns a thing or two about government that cannot be learned in Opposition. I have been there and done it, and I can tell the right hon. Lady that she has been stitched up. It is quite clear that the Bills and policies from the King's Speech that she just referenced were written not by her, but by the Chancellor and her advisers. We all know that because we watched the Chancellor announce them in far more detail in her speech last week.

All the stuff that the Secretary of State worked on in Opposition, such as her new deal for workers, has been taken off her and given to the Business Secretary. I am sorry to tell the right hon. Lady that her colleagues—the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and their many advisers—have written a manifesto and made promises that are not deliverable, and they have hung them around her neck and said, “Ange, you go out there and you sell it.” I am sad to see many of her shadow team not sitting beside her as Ministers. They worked for free, grinding in opposition for years, only to watch the children of the chosen ones get the ministerial cars and salaries before their maiden speeches were written. Wow. Sue Gray was a lot nicer to me when she worked in my Department.

I think we know who is in charge, and it is not the right hon. Lady. She has been stitched up—her colleagues have made her the fall guy. The Government have promised 1.5 million houses by the end of this Parliament—over 800 houses per day—and we are already two weeks in. As she goes on, day after day, she will realise that a backlog is building, and there is no way out. I want her to know that I am here for her. I will be here to hold her hand and walk her through what is likely to be a very difficult time. I may even give her some tips because, having worked in that Department, I know what needs to be done. I know what we should have done but did not do, and I know that the Labour Government will make the same mistakes.

It is not that 1.5 million homes by the end of this Parliament is unachievable, but it will require the sort of systemic change that Labour Members are not ready for. I know that because of how they voted in the last Parliament and how they campaigned in their own constituencies. I will not read out the long list of all the Cabinet members who have been opposing planning in their backyard, including the Housing Minister. Many of them thought that they would get into government and concrete over lots of Tory constituencies. Three weeks ago, just 15% of the green belt was in Labour constituencies. Now it is 50%. They are not Tory constituencies now—they are Labour. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] Yes, they are Labour. I say to Labour Members, “They are now your voters and your electorate, and you’re going to have to tell them that you’re going to do something that many of you promised locally that you would never do, not that long ago.”

However, mostly it will not be the problem of the Cabinet, who will look after themselves. It will be the Back Benchers—all those bright, shiny faces I see sitting behind the right hon. Lady, who are really excited to be here. They have not started getting those angry emails that we have been replying to for 14 years. Many of those voters, on whom their narrow, slim majorities now rely, will be writing to them.

In the spirit of sisterly support, I will let the right hon. Lady know what will happen over the next few weeks and months. Labour Members are looking so nervous right now. The right hon. Lady will have a consultation period, which will take this long. Then, she will have to respond to that consultation, which will take that long. Assuming that nothing goes wrong with either of those processes, we reach December or January. Six months will have passed—10% of the Parliament—and the Government will not have built any extra homes. At this point, she will be running 500 homes behind the target every single day and they would not have started building properly. [Interruption.] The Minister of State in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), is chuntering from a sedentary position, “You wait and see.” We have seen. We have been there. We know; you don’t.

And as it becomes clear to their voters what is happening in their new Labour constituencies—for which, congratulations—in the green belt, those MPs are going to receive a lot more emails. I mean, a lot more. They are going to want a lot of public meetings, because they will know that the decisions she announced are now being taken out of local hands and made by central Government. And the only way that they can register their concern is by appealing to their local MPs, who will all be appealing to her.

Well, this is what being in power is. Government is about making difficult decisions. Opposition is easy—we have been watching Labour do it for 14 years, and it has spent all that time telling the people of this country that they will do better. So here is the record that they are going to have to beat: we built 1 million new homes in the course of the last Parliament, while safeguarding the green belt; and 2.5 million since 2010, despite covid. We delivered nearly 700,000 new affordable homes and over 172,000 of those were for social rent. We put in place the £11.5 billion affordable homes programme. Does the right hon. Lady even know yet if the Chancellor will give her up to £11.5 billion? She is going to need a lot more than that if she is going to beat our record.

And let us not forget what Labour did just last year. We had a majority in this House, but not in the other place, where they whipped Labour Lords to vote against an amendment on nutrient neutrality, using new Brexit powers to unlock 160,000 homes. Many new Members did not see that happening. They are going to find it shocking. We legislated for that and they blocked it—destructive opposition. Are they going to reverse that decision? I have a feeling they will not. And that is why I am worried about the right hon. Lady. Is she going to be able to face down her Back Benchers? Or will Labour carry on not doing the things that have to be done in order to build homes?

Let us look at Labour’s record. The right hon. Lady talked about what happened after the last world war. In the year to June 2009, when everybody here was alive

[Kemi Badenoch]

and they were last in government, they only built 75,000 new homes—the lowest level of housebuilding since the 1920s. And what are they doing where they currently are in government? In London, Sadiq Khan has failed to hit his own targets, beginning just 21,000 new homes in 2022, despite us giving him pots and pots of money. We were forced to intervene on his housebuilding failures. Why has he not built on all those car parks that she was talking about in her speech? In Wales, the Labour Administration promised to deliver 20,000 new homes for social rent by 2026. They have barely delivered a quarter. The right hon. Lady may pretend that building homes is easy, but Labour know it is not easy because they failed in London and they failed in Wales, and they are already making new mistakes.

We all know that immigration increases housing demand. Just this week, we heard that they are going to be fast-tracking 90,000 illegal immigrants who already landed here. If they are permitted to stay, they will require permanent housing. We put the Rwanda scheme in place to limit illegal immigration. They have scrapped it. With no plans whatsoever to tackle the problem, has she got 90,000 homes ready for the people the Home Secretary is going to be fast-tracking through? If not, she is already 90,000 homes down on the target the Prime Minister has set for her.

So that is why I am feeling very generous towards the right hon. Lady, because she has been stitched up. She is going to need some friends, and I want her to know that we are all here for her. [Laughter.] Some people think opposition is about throwing mud across the Chamber or calling your opponents scum, but often it is about saying, “I told you so.” I want to reassure the right hon. Lady that I will be here to say, “I told you so” when these targets are missed.

We, of course, will be a constructive Opposition. We want to see homes built in the right places with the right infrastructure. We are here to help. I doubt the same can be said of the biggest local nimbys in the country, the Liberal Democrats. There are many more of them now—you wouldn't know it, but there are—usually elected on promises not to build anything anywhere in their communities. In the last Parliament, I watched them oppose planning reforms on permitted development; reforms that would have allowed us to build on land that was already in use. It will be very interesting to see how they square their nimby tendencies with their manifesto promises—but then again, saying one thing and doing another has never bothered the Liberal Democrats. The right hon. Lady will not get any help from them, but we are here for her.

I have heard some of Labour's plans. Introducing mandatory targets while introducing new regulatory costs will not work. Without taxpayer funding, Labour's affordable housing targets are unviable. Where is that money going to come from? The mandate that Labour wants to enforce implies a consequence for missing the target. What will that consequence be for local councils? Is Labour going to scrap the neighbourhood plans that communities have put together to deliver more homes? What will those councils say when they are forced to do things that they promised they would not do just eight weeks ago?

We have heard from Labour Members that they will introduce mechanisms for overriding local decision making to identify the land for development. That is fine, but identifying land does not mean that homes or infrastructure will be built. I look forward to the Second Reading of the right hon. Lady's Bill, when she will have to explain the plans that the Chancellor and her spads have written up for her, and she can tell us in great technical detail how they will be delivered—although I suspect that she will leave the tricky stuff to her junior Ministers. We Conservatives may not be as many as we used to be, but we still know all the stuff that we learned over 14 years as we delivered 2.5 million homes. We know where the difficulties are, and we know the technicalities; the right hon. Lady is just learning. We will be ready and waiting to show that she and her party have made promises that they cannot keep, and in many cases have no idea what they are doing.

The Labour Government have a tough act to follow—[Laughter.] They do! However, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and I am pleased to see that they have been copying and pasting many of the policies that we had in government. We introduced metro mayors with substantial powers; now they are announcing that they are going to do more. We put billions of levelling-up funding into communities, backing metro mayors such as Ben Houchen; let us see whether Labour will follow that for all its new mayors. In the last local government finance settlement we made £64.7 billion pounds available to local authorities, a 7.5% increase in cash terms. Let us see whether Labour tops that, rather than just moving money from one part of the country to another.

We would like to see the Labour Government get the Holocaust Memorial Bill—which we initiated—on to the statute book, as the Prime Minister promised, and we will support them in that. We must do right by our Jewish communities, and we provided record levels of funding to protect them from harm and extremism. We took decisive action to tackle growing sectarianism, so we were disappointed not to see any mention in the King's Speech of how Labour would continue that. In the election we saw independent MPs win seats from Labour on the back of sectarianism and integration failures, a problem whose existence Labour continually denies even as we are watching riots in Leeds.

It is time to put away the childish displays and fake outrage that Labour has been showing. The right hon. Lady will need to get very serious very quickly, and where she has the right ambition, we will do what we can to support her in facing down those members sitting behind her who still do not get it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Edward Leigh): Order. Because we are trying to get in as many Members as possible, I shall have to impose a seven-minute time limit on all Back-Bench speakers. I urge maiden speakers, who will not have a formal time limit imposed on them, to stick to that sort of limit. Obviously, the time limit will not apply to the Liberal Democrat spokesman, but I know that she will try to be brief.

11.53 am

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) in

her rightful place as Deputy Prime Minister. It is also a pleasure to speak in this first King's Speech under a focused and mission-led Labour Government. I wish to record my thanks to the constituents of Southgate and Wood Green for putting their faith in me to represent them as the first Member of Parliament for this newly configured constituency.

The legislative programme in the King's Speech shows that the Government are determined to get cracking with the legislation needed for a long-term national renewal, and nowhere more so than in housing. The shortage of both private and social housing is a huge problem across the country. Families and children often wait for years in temporary accommodation that may no longer be suitable, and many young people are unable to afford a deposit on a new home whose price has far outstripped earnings in recent years. They are forced either to stay at home with their parents, or to live in precarious shared accommodation. Another scandal is the high level of no-fault evictions, which is adding to the pressures on local authorities to house homeless people. It is for those reasons that I welcome the proposed renters reform Bill, which will abolish section 21 no-fault evictions and strengthen tenants' protections and rights to challenge rent increases, among other things.

I also welcome the proposed planning and infrastructure Bill, as we need to get on with house building so that people do not have their lives put on hold because of unaffordability. We need to build more houses in the right places, and ensure that there is no adverse impact on local services and that the design and specification are to a high standard. The types of houses built should conform with the needs of the local community, with more family-sized houses needed urgently. We also need more council houses. I applaud the efforts of Enfield and Haringey councils in building more council houses in my constituency, but more needs to be done. I encourage the Government to support councils in any way they can so that more council houses are built. To build more houses, we need a highly skilled local workforce, which is why I welcome the measures in the proposed Skills England Bill, which will identify national and local skills needs and ensure that they are being met.

I turn now to other elements of the King's Speech. We all need to ensure that our communities are safe, which is why I welcome the measures in the proposed crime and policing Bill, which will give the police and law enforcement new powers to tackle antisocial behaviour and retail crime, focusing on attacks on shop workers and low-level shoplifting. Small and medium-sized local businesses, which are the lifeblood of our local high streets, are now seriously impacted by even low-level crime, so we need to make sure that they are supported and that law enforcement takes seriously all reported retail crime.

Knife crime has a terrible, devastating effect on the lives of victims' families and friends, and I find it shocking and sad that the perpetrators are often the same age as the victims. That is why I am pleased to see that tougher sanctions will be introduced to ban ninja swords and other lethal blades, while tackling the gangs who exploit children for criminal purposes. It is also good to see that there will be support for teenagers at risk of being drawn into crime.

On a personal level, I am delighted to see that the tobacco and vapes Bill will be reintroduced in this Parliament. I had the privilege of serving on the Bill Committee earlier this year, and there is cross-party support and unity on progressively banning the sale of tobacco products forever. It was a joy to see the UK become a world leader in this area of public health, and I put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) and Dame Andrea Leadsom for the excellent bipartisan work that they did to progress the Bill before it fell as a result of the general election being called. I sincerely hope that it progresses to Royal Assent this time.

The final Bill I wish to comment on is the draft equality (race and disability) Bill, which will enshrine in law the full right to equal pay for ethnic minorities and disabled people, and introduce mandatory ethnicity and disability pay reporting for larger companies. I sincerely hope that where there is any disparity, employers take the appropriate action to address their failings and close the gap.

The King's Speech is an exciting beginning for the Labour Government, who are keen to make a real difference to people's lives, including those of my constituents in Southgate and Wood Green. The starting gun for national renewal has been fired, and we have got off to a flying start. I hope that the pace of change continues and that we see positive, long-lasting benefits in housing, community safety, health and equality for all.

11.58 am

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I congratulate the Deputy Prime Minister and welcome her to her place, and I welcome the shadow Secretary of State as well. Because we are talking about local government today, I declare my interest as a vice-president of the Local Government Association.

The topic of today's debate is planning, the greenbelt and rural affairs. We need to talk about planning and housing, and I will certainly do so, but we also need to talk about rural affairs, and I am slightly confused about why none of the speeches by Front Benchers has done that. I welcome the Government's focus on house building and the reintroduction of housing targets. In England, the number of people left languishing on the social housing waiting list has reached 1.2 million, and there are 8.5 million people in this country with some form of unmet housing need. Last year, under the Conservative Government, 29,000 social homes were sold or demolished, and fewer than 7,000 were built, so we all know that we have an unprecedented need for new housing, particularly social housing.

The Liberal Democrats' ambitious commitment on social housing would be to build 150,000 social homes a year by the end of this Parliament—

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): Just not in your seat.

Helen Morgan: The hon. Gentleman is muttering from a sedentary position. He may wish to know that my grandparents lived in social housing, and I have no particular prejudices against it whatsoever.

[Helen Morgan]

We are committed not only to building the homes that are so important to easing the crisis throughout the housing market, but to ensuring that those new homes are of a high standard, that they are zero carbon and that they are built alongside proper infrastructure that provides communities with the services and amenities they need. Integrating public service delivery has to be part of the planning process, so in principle we welcome the Government's plans to streamline the delivery of critical infrastructure, including in the housing sector, in the forthcoming planning and infrastructure Bill, but we need to be clear that the current system has benefited developers rather than communities. The Bill must take that into account.

Crude targets alone have led to many developments being given permission, only for affordable and social housing elements to be watered down on the basis of viability once permission is granted. That must change. We know that local authorities are best placed to make the decisions about housing in their areas, so I urge the Government to ensure that their mandatory housing targets are built from the bottom up—by determining the type of housing and infrastructure communities need, and empowering local government to build social homes where they are most needed. We need the necessary infrastructure, including GPs, schools, bus stops and bus routes, while also ensuring that there is appropriate green space and access to the countryside, which is important for health and wellbeing. Our experience is that residents support good plans with good infrastructure.

Now, I imagine that we will use the term “nimby” in this debate, and it has already been used about the Liberal Democrats, but it is not appropriate to approve housing in areas that are unsuitable—for example, where there is a high risk of flooding. It is not being a nimby to oppose poor planning; it is common sense. Local authorities are under enormous pressure and we know that their planning departments are overstretched. I welcome the Deputy Prime Minister's comments on that point. They need proper funding to ensure that they make good and consistent decisions, and that their councillors are well advised.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): The hon. Member is talking about infrastructure and about decisions being made in the best interests of our communities, so can I ask why Liberal Democrat-run Rutland county council this week turned down an application for a new day care centre for people with special educational needs without even taking it to the planning committee, meaning that we now have to rely on the council's service, rather than providing choice to ensure that anyone with learning disabilities or other disabilities in our community gets the support they need?

Helen Morgan: I do not know the details of that individual case, but we need to ensure that planning departments are properly funded so that the decisions made by planning officers are appropriate. Without knowing the details, I do not know whether it is a good development or a poor one, but those departments need to be empowered to make decisions correctly.

Some proposals for development are inappropriate and some are downright dangerous—we mentioned the building of houses on floodplains earlier. The only insurer to re-insure houses on floodplains is due to close its operations in 15 years' time. We cannot build houses on floodplains. It will not be possible for them to be insured or sold; homeowners will be trapped.

We should also not be building housing developments without additional schools or GP surgeries. Most importantly, we should not be building housing developments where the developers do not prepare the roads and green spaces to an acceptable standard and do not allow them to be adopted by the local authority, but set up a shared management company and leave the homeowners fleeced for the rest of their home ownership experience. I encourage the Deputy Prime Minister to consider that in the forthcoming legislation.

Good councillors approve planning for good developments. That is why, on the days when the Conservatives are not accusing us of being nimbys, they are telling people that we are going to concrete over their countryside.

Planning is not just about housing. We have many demands on our countryside: housing, renewable energy, nature restoration and, importantly, the growing of food. We need to simplify planning so that all those things can happen. Housing, renewable energy and job creation are incredibly important, but I urge the Government to ensure that when they go ahead, it is not at the expense of food production. The Liberal Democrats have called for the development of a land use strategy so that these important and competing demands can be balanced, and so that we use land in the optimal way, protecting the highest grade arable land for food production and putting the infrastructure of renewable energy and housing in less prime places. I therefore hope that the Government will consider a land use strategy as part of their planning reform.

That brings me to another important area of the countryside: our waterways and our beaches. It is a scandal that raw sewage has been allowed to be dumped into our rivers and on to our beaches, while water company executives have taken home huge bonuses and their—often overseas—shareholders have taken huge dividends. The Liberal Democrats are proud to have led the campaign to end the sewage crisis. We welcome the water (special measures) Bill and will be watching closely to ensure that the water regulator is given the powers it needs to finally end this sewage outrage.

I will move on to rural affairs. There was no mention in the King's Speech of rural communities or priorities for the countryside, which I hope means that the new Government will be ensuring that every policy is rural-proofed and that the demands of delivering public services in rural areas, where the population is spread over a large area, are being considered.

I also want to mention the English devolution bill. The Liberal Democrats are the proud voices of local communities and community-led politics, and we absolutely welcome steps to devolve power away from Westminster, but I ask the Secretary of State to confirm what that will look like for those councils without a devo deal, a metro mayor or a combined authority mayor. It is important that all local councils have the powers and funding to deliver for their communities. That funding must reflect the cost of delivering services in rural areas.

Rural councils have been taken for granted for far too long. We need to ensure that people who live in rural areas, who also see increases in their council tax, are getting the public services that they deserve.

Rurality affects the delivery of all types of services, but I want to touch on just a few key areas. Health is an important issue in my North Shropshire constituency, where we have seen huge problems with GP and dentistry access and a crisis in our A&E service. While I welcome the Government's plans to tackle the crisis in mental health service provision, which is also a big problem in rural areas, we really want to see rural-focused policy to deal with the recruitment crisis in rural areas and the cost of delivering health services over large distances, and to ensure that people who live a long way from a hospital or diagnostic centre can travel to it more easily.

That brings me to public transport, which is quite problematic in Shropshire. We have lost 63% of our bus miles since 2015, which makes it difficult for anybody to access work opportunities, social opportunities, educational opportunities and, indeed, health services. I am really pleased that the Government will allow local authorities to franchise their own bus services—the Liberal Democrats have long called for that—but I would like to see the detail of how that will work and how we will get the funding to kick-start those routes and get labour moving properly around our countryside.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Edward Leigh): Order. Can the hon. Lady bring her remarks to a close, please?

Helen Morgan: Of course.

I was briefly going to mention mobile signal, but I will rush over that because I have talked about it a reasonable amount in the House. I want to talk about farming and the rural economy, because that is the backbone of our economy and food production is extremely important. Farmers have faced a crisis over the last few years, with the botched introduction of the environmental land management scheme, the input costs they face and the fact that vast tracts of farmland are underwater and have been for the last 18 months. I must encourage the Government to look at trade deals to ensure that farmers are working on a level playing field, and to ensure that the sustainable farming incentive deals with the consistent problem of flooding following prolonged rainfall, given how our farmers are storing an enormous amount of water upstream.

I will draw my remarks to a close because I am keen to hear the maiden speeches of all these new Members, who I welcome to this place. To reinforce the points I have made, community-led planning is so important, and we would love to see a land use strategy. We need to ensure that the cost of delivering public services in rural areas is properly considered and funded, and the infrastructure needs to be there. Finally, please do not forget about food security, which is so important to national renewal.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Sam Rushworth to make his maiden speech.

12.8 pm

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me this opportunity to make my maiden speech during the King's Speech debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southgate

and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) for his excellent contribution, as well as the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan). Like her, I represent a rural constituency, and I recognise many of the issues she raised in my own community.

I also want to thank my predecessor, Dehenna Davison, for her service. In her maiden speech, she described Bishop Auckland as England's "most beautiful constituency," and on that point we agree. She is a formidable campaigner who did important work to raise awareness of migraines, lobular cancer and the danger of one-punch assaults. Although she already has the accolade of being the first ever Conservative MP for Bishop Auckland, I hope that, in decades to come, her legacy will be even more impressive as the only ever Conservative MP for Bishop Auckland.

If the House will indulge me for a moment, I would like to say a little about the place I call home, the people who live there and what makes them so special. Getting my priorities in order, I will start by talking about football. I had been looking forward to singing "one general election and one European cup" this summer, but that was not to be. I am gutted that our England team did not quite make it, but football did come home in 1909, when West Auckland became the first football team to win the world cup. That is true, and you can look it up.

Another important footballing moment came in 1958, when Bishop Auckland's amateur football club famously provided players to help Manchester United fulfil their fixtures following the Munich air disaster.

I was really touched when I met Barry, who volunteers at the local Bishops football museum. I listened to his passion as he shared how a gentleman with dementia came in and recognised himself in an old black and white photograph. They developed a friendship as he used football memorabilia to help that gentleman reminisce and reconnect with his past. I am similarly grateful to others in my constituency who give up their time to run sports clubs, whether it is football, rugby, cricket or boxing, providing opportunities for young people to exercise, connect and enjoy themselves.

Secondly, I have to mention railways. It was in Shildon, in the south-east of my constituency, where Stephenson invented the Rocket locomotive, making Stockton to Darlington the world's first commercial railway line 200 years ago next year. It is inspiring to see the commitment of local volunteers who work together to preserve this heritage, caring for parts of the line and organising bicentenary events. Likewise, it was inspiring to see those who worked to save the Shildon Railway Institute, which was set up by working people nearly two centuries ago, with a library and school rooms to upskill the local workforce for the new industrial age.

Thirdly, we are blessed with fabulous arts and culture in Bishop Auckland, which is the home of Stanley Jefferson, of Laurel and Hardy fame. It is also believed to be where Elgar first played the anthem "Land of Hope and Glory." And how grateful I am to the volunteers who give their time to enable participation in the arts: Daisy Arts, Jack Drum, the Teesdale operatic society, the Weardale Warblers and "Kynren," England's most spectacular outdoor theatre production. The work they do is not only developing talent but building the character and confidence of the rising generation.

[Sam Rushworth]

Fourthly, we have magnificent countryside. Under the new boundaries, the constituency brings together two Durham dales—Weardale and Teesdale—around the market town of Barnard Castle, which is not only a handy place to test your eyesight but is also an idyllic place to stroll along the river with your family on a sunny Easter bank holiday, surrounded as it is by hill sheep farms and moorlands that are home to rare wildflowers and endangered ground nesting birds. I am full of admiration for those who work on the land and put in the graft to keep this place so lovely and to provide us with food. Without wishing to disappoint the right hon. Member for North West Essex (Kemi Badenoch), when I recently met local farmers they were delighted to see that Labour is bringing in planning reforms and lifting the ban on onshore wind.

Finally, Bishop Auckland has a long connection with the Church. Auckland castle served for centuries as home to the Prince Bishops, while the seventh-century Escomb Saxon church is one of the oldest in England and stands as a monument to the devotion of the men and women who built it more than a millennium ago. What I find equally inspiring is the work done by churches in our community today, such as Woodhouse Close church and community centre and Shildon Alive, which recently received the King's award for voluntary service.

What makes Bishop Auckland so special to me are the people I live among. People who have stood together in hard times, people who take pride in their neighbourhoods and people who serve without thought for themselves.

If I might make a slightly more political point as I draw to a close, we have just accepted the decline of northern heartlands like Bishop Auckland for too long. I live in the town centre, where one in three shops is boarded up. Our local businesses are excited to see the powers that this Government will devolve to local authorities to compulsorily purchase some of those buildings. We will hand them over to businesses and we will get our town centres booming again.

Finally, I am proud to be a Member of the most representative Parliament in our history, with the highest percentage of women, minorities and state-educated Members. There are also, on all Benches, some exceedingly talented people. It is already clear to me that while I will be bold in speaking up for my constituents, there will always be someone more gifted in oratory or more learned. However, I hope that if I can excel in anything, it will be in showing kindness and respect to my fellow Members, to the incredible staff who have done so much to make me feel welcome in this rather strange place, and to my constituents who I hope will always know, whatever our disagreements, that I love and care about them.

12.16 pm

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) on his maiden speech. We are all much more knowledgeable about his constituency now than we were a few minutes ago, so well done for that.

I acknowledge that the planning system is in need of reform. We cannot have a process that takes months—in many cases, years—for major projects, crucial to economic growth and associated jobs, to grind through an endless system. In my constituency, most such projects are located in an area that is, and has been for many years, mainly industrial. Although we should not trample on local opinion, we have to get those projects through the system more quickly than we do at the moment.

The Gracious Speech included this:

“My Government believes that greater devolution of decision making is at the heart of a modern dynamic economy and is a key driver of economic growth and my Ministers will introduce an English Devolution Bill. Legislation will be introduced to give new powers to metro mayors and combined authorities. This will support local growth plans that bring economic benefit to communities.”—[*Official Report*, 17 July 2024; Vol. 752, c. 39.]

Of course we need to increase the supply of housing, but how do Ministers square devolving decision making with strengthening central direction of the planning process and tying the hands of planning authorities? The Labour manifesto said that the Government would “make full use of intervention powers”.

That does not sound like good news for local democracy.

Experience from my constituency shows that local communities will, in most cases, accept more housing developments, but they make the justifiable complaint that recent developments in all parts of my constituency, from Humberston, through New Waltham, Waltham, Scartho, Laceby, Wootton and Barton, to name just a few, mean that the already stretched highway infrastructure and public services, such as school places, GPs and the like, are now stretched beyond what is acceptable. What assurances can Ministers give that they will ensure new build will run in parallel to the provision of infrastructure and public services?

Another aspect of the planning process that angers people is that many appeals are determined by planning inspectors who frequently overrule council decisions that have been made after careful consideration of local circumstances. In some cases, such decisions have even overturned the local plan. That is not acceptable. Local plans go through various stages of consultation, including public hearings, all of which passes by the overwhelming majority of the public, until an application is lodged that could change the whole character of the neighbourhood. Clearly, the process needs to be reviewed, as I have previously argued, including in a ten-minute rule Bill I introduced some years ago.

If devolution and local decision making is to mean anything, planning issues should be determined at a local level, wherever possible. The shadow Secretary of State mentioned that there are current Ministers who lodged objections to planning applications for developments in their own areas. That went under the radar to some extent while they were in opposition, but now there is no hiding place for them. Every Labour Member who votes for proposed planning changes to some village or some part of the town will have to justify not supporting their constituents when they are up in arms about the application.

As someone who spent their childhood and early adulthood in a council house on a Grimsby estate, I have always supported the ability of local authorities to build council houses where that is appropriate. The ones that I lived in were built in the early 1950s when a

Conservative Government were in power. They were of high quality and have stood the test of time. Sadly, that is not the case for much of the social housing that is imposed on new developments. I certainly would support the Government if they had a programme to encourage and support councils in house building, but I would be interested to know how they would finance it.

One proposal that is causing considerable concern, not just in my Brigg and Immingham constituency, but in many other constituencies along the east coast of Lincolnshire and through into East Anglia, is the National Grid upgrade on the Grimsby to Walpole route. These proposals could result in a network of 50-metre-high pylons running through some of the country's most beautiful countryside, including impacting on the Lincolnshire Wolds area of outstanding natural beauty. I secured the final Adjournment debate on this matter before the election and the then Minister said that he was minded to order a review of the scheme. I urge the Government to honour that commitment and follow through with that review.

Finally, let me return to devolution and the policy to create more combined authorities. The proposals for the Greater Lincolnshire Authority have already passed through all stages of consultation, and a statutory instrument has been prepared, but, unfortunately, the election intervened. I say to the Deputy Prime Minister that this is an opportunity for an early win in her wish to create combined authorities. If she were to put forward that SI, I think most of the Lincolnshire MPs would give her some support.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Edward Leigh): I call Dr Scott Arthur for his maiden speech.

12.22 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I am obliged to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech. I would like to start by thanking the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) for a fantastic speech, but I fear that he has made my job only a little more difficult. I have to say that it is a delight to give my maiden speech in a debate led by our fantastic Deputy Prime Minister.

It is an honour and a privilege to stand before this House as the representative for Edinburgh South West. I am deeply grateful to my constituents for placing their trust in me and also to my church for praying for me, although I know that they prayed more after I won the election than before it. I am committed to serving them all with dedication and integrity.

Before I address the subject matter of the King's Speech, I would like to pay tribute to my immediate predecessor, Joanna Cherry KC, who represented the constituency for nine years. I had many dealings with her office in my role as a councillor, and I always found her team to be utterly professional. I wish them all well. Joanna Cherry herself was a formidable parliamentarian. Members will recall that, during the Brexit crisis, she worked hard to ensure that Government decision making remained transparent and subject to parliamentary scrutiny. We all owe her a huge debt for that. I must also say that, although I disagree with her on many issues, I am happy to stand in complete solidarity with her in the face of

the threats that she has faced. It pains me that, since coming here, so many others have spoken about threats and intimidation as well. This is an issue that we must take seriously. I must, however, tell the House that the campaign for Edinburgh South West between Joanna Cherry and myself was conducted entirely on the issues that matter to local people there, which is perhaps why I am so proud to be here to address the House today.

I must also pay tribute to my predecessor's predecessor. Alistair Darling was one of the greatest public servants of my lifetime. He sat here from 1987 to 2015. Like me, he was a councillor in Edinburgh, and convener of the city's transport committee before he went on to serve as MP for Edinburgh South West. The similarities may end there. Indeed, we must all hope that I am never called on, as he was, to save the Bank of England. I know that Alistair is still much missed and I am proud to follow in his footsteps—indeed, without his help I doubt that I would have been elected as a councillor in 2017.

Before I address myself to the debate, I would like to take the opportunity to pay tribute to my constituency, its institutions and its people. At this point, Members may need a map. Edinburgh South West is the best part of the greatest city in the world. It stretches from the west end of Princes Street to the East Cairn hill, some 18 km to the south-west. Along its length, the constituency moves from dense urban communities—places such as Gorgie, the home of Hearts football club, Dalry, Parkhead, Wester Hailes, Sighthill and Oxfords—to suburban settlements such as Colinton, Craiglockhart, Swanston and Baberton Mains, and to the semi-rural Water of Leith villages of Currie, Juniper Green and Balerno.

Of all those, Oxfords is perhaps the place I know and love most. Many people there struggle in temporary and overcrowded accommodation; that is why it has been so important today to hear about the Deputy Prime Minister's ambition to build affordable homes. In Edinburgh, we have worked with the whole city and set aside land for 37,000 new homes. The land is there and the planning is there, but the barrier to building those new homes is the lack of funding from the Scottish Government. I hope that they can now follow what we are doing here, and show more ambition on affordable housing in Scotland.

When it comes to natural beauty, the Pentland hills and the Water of Leith dominate my constituency, and the habitats along the Union canal should not be forgotten. But of course it is the people who make my constituency so special, such as those who volunteer at the Water of Leith Conservation Trust or who converted a disused railway tunnel into Scotland's largest historical mural—the Colinton tunnel; please google it later. I must also mention Tiphereth, a unique charity that delivers residential and day services for people with learning difficulties. It really is unique.

The Edinburgh campus of Heriot-Watt University is perhaps the biggest employer in my constituency. It supported and developed me every day from when I started working there in 1996 until I was elected to this place. I shall miss my civil engineering colleagues and the many students it welcomes to Scotland from around the world. I hope to use some of my time here to support higher education, particularly the wellbeing of students. Mental health support in Scotland is failing its young people and acting as a barrier to many of them

[*Dr Scott Arthur*]

reaching their full potential. I will work with anyone and everyone to address that and the many other challenges facing students across the UK.

Other large employers in my constituency include Lothian Buses, a bus company owned by the people of Edinburgh that defines the city just as much as the castle. I should stress that the castle is not in my constituency. If some Members question municipal ownership of public transport, or the importance of collaborative working between trade unions and management, they should speak to some of the 2 million passengers that Lothian Buses carries every week without any subsidy. Big businesses are also important in my constituency, but it is the small ones that define it. They are at the heart of many of the neighbourhoods. Many have high hopes that the UK and Scottish Governments will now work together to support them more.

I am also proud to say that there are two infantry barracks in my constituency: Dregghorn and Redford. Both are valued by local residents as real assets, and they never caused me a problem as a councillor. The proposal in the King's Speech for an armed forces commissioner will be supported by many in my constituency, particularly if it helps improve the living quarters for our service personnel and supports spouses at the point of relationship breakdown, particularly when domestic abuse has been an issue.

Elections are a reminder that we are all equal in this country, but it pained me that many constituents felt that they were less equal than others during the election campaign. That is why local groups in my constituency such as Soul Food Oxfangs, Best Bib n Tucker and Whale Arts must be mentioned in my speech, as they all work hard to ensure that people feel included and valued. That is our job too, of course—indeed, all of us here have a duty to keep on listening to voters now that the election is over. The first-past-the-post system means that I was elected on just 40.9% of the vote—I still cannot believe it, to be honest—and I know that some of those voters still want to be reassured that they did the right thing. I am here only because I promised to work with other parties where possible, and to listen to everybody in my constituency, no matter their sex, gender, background, faith, age or birthplace. I will keep listening to people, even if they voted for my opponents or did not vote at all.

We know, of course, that the people who need our help most did not vote for us. Among them are the 3,000 children in my constituency who are living in poverty. That number has grown across the whole UK since Labour last sat on the Government Benches, and that should shame us all. I know the costed measures in the King's Speech are our best chance of changing those lives.

Measures such as GB Energy, building more homes, a new deal for working people and our plans for sustainable economic growth will not just get our country back on track and help us to meet our climate targets, but give parents hope again of a better future for their children. The child poverty taskforce is an opportunity to maximise the benefits of those policies by integrating their delivery. That is the change our country needs and voted for, and we must now work together across this Chamber to deliver it.

12.30 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) on his maiden speech. It was wonderful to hear him champion so many local charities and causes, particularly for young people. It is great to hear that he cares about the mental health and wellbeing of young people. I also congratulate the new hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) on his speech, and his drive-by of the entire constituency and the wonderful things that people can see and experience in his patch. What I loved about both speeches is that both hon. Members put their constituents first and talked about being a local champion. I will support anyone, whatever party or part of the House they are from, who wants to put their constituents first and be an advocate for them in this House.

On that subject, I am here because the people of Beaconsfield, Marlow and the south Bucks villages sent a clear message to me during the general election that they want me to stand up and defend the green belt. I made a promise to them back in 2019 and again in 2024 that I would stand up and defend the green belt. I will continue to do so. For my constituents, the green belt is not just special; it is vital. It acts as the lungs of London. It is vital because for my constituents it is the buffer between the sprawl of London and Slough; because green space provides much-needed mental health and wellbeing space for my constituents; and because it provides the biodiversity and nature conservation areas that we need between London and the home counties. It is essential that we protect nature, and I want to be a champion for that as well. Once our green belt is lost, it is lost forever and we cannot get it back.

I want to be clear: I believe in the right housing, in the right place, with the right infrastructure. It is entirely a false prospectus to think that people who defend the green belt are somehow anti-growth and anti-housing. That is not true. Here is the truth: the Government seem determined to deny that the green belt is green space, but any attempt by the Government to use some Orwellian twisting of words to make it grey belt will fail in the sunlight of simple truth.

In Marlow in my constituency, we fought together with local community groups to stop the Marlow film studios being built on green-belt space. We worked tirelessly to protect the green belt, so that future generations could enjoy that beautiful green area. We fought as a community, and the proposal was rightly rejected. If the Government try to bring it back, I and the residents will fight it every inch of the way.

The Government established their intent in their first three days of existence: the Government know best and communities will be ignored. The Chancellor—not, funnily enough, the Deputy Prime Minister—announced that the Government were calling in an application, rejected by planners and the Planning Inspectorate, to build a data centre in the Ivers, right up against London. It was a blatant attack on local opinion and professional planning officers. Do Ministers really believe that there are no better sites for a data centre than directly on the only green belt that separates us from London? I say to the Government: you will soon discover that you are on the wrong side of this debate. Our green belt in south Bucks is not a political, ideological prize to be won. Residents will make their voices heard, and I will be right there by their side. It matters to my constituents

and the generations to follow who will grow up and live in the beautiful area of Beaconsfield, Marlow and the south Bucks villages. I urge the Government to think again. Leave our green belt alone.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Christopher Chope): I call Emma Foody to make her maiden speech.

12.35 pm

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey), who spoke passionately about her communities. It has been wonderful to hear so many Members make their maiden speech today and over the preceding days, speaking with great pride about their constituency. I stand here today representing my home constituency of Cramlington and Killingworth, and I speak with similar pride. It is the place that generations of my family have hailed from, worked in and loved, and it is a great honour to represent it here today.

My home, and where I grew up, is a little place called Wideopen. It was once represented by Margaret Bondfield, a giant of our Labour movement. She was a shop worker and trade unionist who was the first ever woman in the Cabinet. As a former shop worker, and a trade unionist and Co-operative Member, it is pleasure for me to see in the Gracious Speech provision for the protections that shop workers deserve and need in order to make our high streets stronger.

Cramlington and Killingworth constituency was newly formed at this election. Dominated by our two new towns, the seat is made up of a further 25 villages and settlements—every single one a community in its own right. Although I do not propose to list each and every one of them now, I will fight for the support and success of them all. Our area and our communities are places of industry, innovation and creativity. Whether through coalmines, factories or the arts, my community has contributed a lot that has put it on the map.

There is a certain mention today for George Stephenson, the father of the British railways. Although the Rocket might be in Shildon, he learned his trade and started his inventions in my constituency, where my ancestors worked alongside him to build our railroads. Colleagues may recall that in “Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?”—a favourite of yours, I am sure, Mr Deputy Speaker—Bob and Thelma’s new starter home on a nice new estate was in Killingworth. We also have notable public art in the shape of a giant spoon, a herd of concrete hippos, and a Lady of the North in Northumberlandia.

Members my age may recall the absolutely iconic BBC children’s TV programme “Geordie Racer”. Spuggy and Wordy got up to hi-jinks at Seaton Delaval hall, our stunning National Trust property. I am sorry that those familiar with the programme will now have the theme tune in their head all day. More recently, those who watched the popular detective show “Vera” may have noticed the stunning coastline and cliffs; all too often, a body is found at the bottom of them. Those cliffs and beaches, along the coastline of south-east Northumberland, including Seaton Sluice and Old Hartley, are second to none, and they are ours. The crime rate is much lower than ITV would have us believe.

As is tradition, I will pay tribute to the previous MPs, but as mine is a newly created constituency, I pay tribute not to one but to four current and previous Members of this House. I will start with my predecessor but one,

Ronnie Campbell, who was the MP for Blyth Valley for over 30 years and a great friend to many in this place. Locally, we still feel his loss. Ian Levy was elected as the first ever Conservative for Blyth Valley in 2019. I know that he cares deeply for our area, and that he will want it to prosper and our communities to thrive.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth (Sir Alan Campbell), of course, is also our Chief Whip. It says here in my speech that he has shown me great kindness and generosity, which I can only assume was a late Whips Office edit. In all seriousness, he has been a great support to me.

Finally, I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) and for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glindon), who are both phenomenal advocates for the north-east, and from whose constituencies we took a variety of towns, settlements and villages. When I first got involved in politics, I was warned that it could be a boys’ club. Well, those people underestimate the girls of Sacred Heart high school, which all three of us attended. There, we were told in no uncertain terms that places like this are meant for people like us. To serve alongside my hon. Friends is a tremendous privilege.

I am proud to be in this place today, and to be able to speak on behalf of my communities on this most Gracious Speech—a wide-ranging set of commitments and actions that I know will deliver, not only for my community but across the country, and not just in housing and, crucially, leasehold reform but for our economy, our energy security and policing. I am particularly proud of the measures to support our national health service. As a former 999 call taker at the North East Ambulance Service, I know how my former colleagues work tirelessly to serve people, often in the most challenging and desperate of circumstances. It is an honour to be here and to have their back in this place. I believe passionately in the measures in this most Gracious Address, which we fought so hard to earn the country’s support for, and I cannot wait to get to work.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Christopher Chope): I call Harriet Cross to make her maiden speech.

12.41 pm

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Cramlington and Killingworth (Emma Foody)—she is clearly very proud of her roots and of what she has achieved in the area. It is lovely to follow another girl from the north-east—although in my case it is the north-east of Scotland.

It is an incredible honour to be elected to this place to serve the great people of Gordon and Buchan. Having moved homes many times in my lifetime—more than I can remember—from Yorkshire to Ireland to Scotland and many times in between, I have seen my fair share of houses, but I can definitely say that this one will take the most getting used to. As Members are all aware, you are not a true Scottish MP if you do not proclaim that your constituency is the most beautiful, so: from the beaches of Balmedie and Newburgh through the fertile farmland of Formartine, Garioch, Huntly and Turriff, to the heights of the Correen hills and the Bennachie range, Gordon and Buchan has it all. I can tell Members in all seriousness that it really is the most beautiful constituency, and not just in Scotland but in the whole of the UK.

[*Harriet Cross*]

Those of us who are blessed to live north of the Watford gap know that there is a direct correlation between how far north you get and being approachable and determined, having a dry sense of humour and being great company. As such, I am also delighted to say that I am the Conservative Member with the most northerly constituency.

First, I must reflect on my predecessors, beginning with the most recent Conservative Members from the two former constituencies that have now been combined to make Gordon and Buchan: Colin Clark in Gordon and David Duguid in Banff and Buchan. Both Colin and David were embedded in our rural communities. They are unwavering champions for our region, in particular being loud, constructive and prominent voices for our farmers, fishermen and distilleries, and for the energy sector. I also want to take the opportunity to wish David Duguid and his family all the very best in his ongoing recovery.

It would be wrong of me not to mention Malcolm Bruce, now Baron Bruce of Bennachie, who served Gordon for 22 years up until 2015. It is a show of the mark that he left on the area that his name was mentioned to me on the doorsteps many times during this election campaign, always very fondly. Finally, the former SNP Member for Gordon and my immediate predecessor, Richard Thomson, has long served the people of Gordon and Buchan and of Aberdeenshire, both in this place and on Aberdeenshire council as both leader and opposition leader. While he and I will not pretend that we see eye to eye on the means, we both agree that we want the very best for our special corner of Aberdeenshire, now and in the future.

Much was achieved for Gordon and Buchan and the north-east of Scotland in the last Parliament. I wish to draw attention to the north-east investment zone, an £80 million investment in our region made as part of the last Conservative Government's levelling-up agenda. It is a real investment in our area's growth, development and potential—an investment in our future. The north-east shines with energy in every way. Indeed, the energy sector is what first brought my family to Inverurie, the largest town in Gordon and Buchan, 50 years ago this year. My grandfather, having been medically discharged from the Navy, never lost his love of service or the sea, so he channelled that love into creating in Aberdeen the International Association for Safety and Survival Training, whose courses are still used today by each and every offshore worker in our oil and gas sector. I am sure that if he were still here today he could give me some sound advice on surviving in this place.

The energy sector powers Aberdeenshire, from direct jobs and high-skilled employment to the associated services and hospitality sectors that rely on it. To the people of Gordon and Buchan and the north-east of Scotland, the debate on the future of the oil and gas sector is not really about energy security, markets or net zero; it is about our jobs and our livelihoods. It is about knowing that we have secure employment for the years to come and that our children will not have to move away to start their career, or that the bottom will not fall out of our local economy. I cannot imagine that any hon. Member would sit here and allow their constituency's key employment sector to be run down or conceded, and I will not do that either.

Our rural communities are the beating heart of Gordon and Buchan. Indeed, three quarters of the land in the constituency is classed as agricultural, a fifth is forestry and only 2% is thought of as built up. If someone drops a pin on a map, it is more likely to land in a field or forest than on a house. Before being elected, I worked as a rural surveyor, meeting farmers across Aberdeenshire, many of whom I am now proud to call my constituents. As intimidating as it might be being on the Opposition side looking across at the Government Benches, that is nothing compared with sitting at a farmhouse table trying to tell farming clients that no, their farm is not worth three times what they think it is worth or that their worse-for-wear heifer will not get top figures at next week's sale.

I am delighted that my first contribution in the House is in this rural affairs debate. I know, and my constituents know, that rural living is unique, rewarding and, in my opinion, far superior to urban life. We also know that it is not all about green fields, welly boots and labradors, idyllic as that might sound. The reality is locals waiting in villages such as Fyvie, Auchleven and New Deer for the only bus of the day, which never arrives. It is the only healthcare facilities for many miles closing down. It is children having to move away to build their career. It is poor-quality, unsuitable roads. Or it is the lack of housing, or houses without gas, poor broadband and no phone coverage.

We in the UK quite rightly hold our rural landscapes up in lights: our green and pleasant lands, which bring ecological benefits as well as much-needed tourism to remote areas. But rural communities are not there solely to be an escape or plaything for others; they are where my constituents make their homes and livelihoods, and where they grow up and grow old. We need tailored policies for our rural communities that help industries such as farming and food and drink producers, and the numerous small and medium-sized enterprises across Gordon and Buchan that bring so much not just to the immediate area but to the region and to the UK as a whole. Yes, we are less densely populated and yes, understandably, we have less choice in services and on where to find work, but we have no less aspiration.

I am proud to have been sent here by the people of Gordon and Buchan to represent them, to fight for them, and always to keep their interests at the top of the agenda.

12.48 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross), who made an excellent maiden speech, which I enjoyed. I also have to mention the excellent maiden speeches from my north-east colleagues, my hon. Friend the Member for Cramlington and Killingworth (Emma Foody)—she represents a new constituency—and my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth). I look forward to hearing more from them in the weeks, months and years to come.

Having entered the House 19 years ago, I am honoured to have once again been elected to serve my constituents in Washington and Gateshead South—another new constituency name. It is fantastic to see so many new faces around the estate, and my door is always open if new Members, or indeed old ones, want to pop in for a bit of advice, a cup of tea, or just to see a friendly face.

This King's Speech ushers in a new era of government—one based on service of the people, and focused on building back trust in politics, which is greatly needed, by, as stated in the King's Speech, adhering to

"the principles of security, fairness and opportunity for all."

We will start that process by bringing in legislation to transform the rights of every worker in this country. As a trade unionist, I believe that workers must have the right to access trade union representation, as well as the repeal of the disastrous minimum service levels legislation, which failed to protect public service users and workers alike.

We will ban all exploitative zero-hours contracts that leave people in uncertain and unstable employment. We will definitively ban fire and rehire practices, which my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) led the way on tackling with his excellent private Member's Bill, which sadly did not make it. We will protect workers' wellbeing by ending short-notice shift cancellations, and we will introduce the right to switch off, so that workers can enjoy a healthier, structured work-life balance—I think we could do with a bit of that sometimes as well. Finally, we will establish rights such as paternity pay and the right to challenge unfair dismissal as rights from day one. The basic rights of a worker are not a reward earned after years of service; they are rights from day one.

The Government have already got the ball rolling, building on the excellent work of former Labour Governments to truly deliver devolved power. It was excellent to see that, just days after moving in, the Prime Minister welcomed all Labour and Conservative metro mayors—thankfully, they were mostly Labour—to Downing Street to discuss how to kick-start growth in all parts of the country. Nine times out of 10, local knowledge is superior to departmental control, so it is only right that we bring power back to communities.

Among the mayors invited to meet the Prime Minister was our excellent new Mayor of the North East, Kim McGuinness, who I have worked with in my long-running campaign to reopen the Leamside line and extend the metro to Washington. I am sure that Members have all heard me say this, but Washington is one of the largest towns in the UK without a direct rail link. *[Interruption.]* It is. We see wasted opportunities, with people unable to travel easily for work, school or university or even to see loved ones. To quote the former Conservative Member for Sedgefield, with whom I co-chaired the Leamside line all-party parliamentary group, "Without physical mobility, there can be no social mobility"—now that he is not here, I am going to nick that line. I am pleased that, with a Labour Government and a Labour mayor, that project will at long last become a reality.

I grew up in a council house, and my family was totally reliant on social security. Free school meals were a lifeline for us, but I know that, in many ways, it is more important to have a warm, safe and secure house; that is what saved my family more than anything else. That is why, throughout this general election campaign and when I was listening to the King's Speech, I was so pleased to see Labour's commitment to building 1.5 million new homes—not just houses, but social and affordable housing—based on five key principles that will enable those houses to turn into secure homes, and those homes to turn into stable and thriving communities.

We will also deliver for our children, with policies intended to tackle childhood health and obesity head-on. Our plans to deliver free breakfast clubs in every primary school in England will ensure that kids can start school with a meal in their bellies, ready to learn. But we know that child feeding does not start and end with the school day, so we will also tackle the crisis of youth nutrition outside school by restricting the advertisement of junk food and the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks to children—both things I long called for when I was shadow Minister for public health for four years, and shadow Minister for children and families for four years, and as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on school food from 2010. I could not welcome these developments more fervently. We cannot shy away from protecting our children's health, which is why I also welcome our tobacco and vapes Bill—carrying on the work of the former Government, I have to say—to phase out smoking. That will ensure that our children live a healthier future.

As we look to the coming years of our Government, I am excited not only to see these policies, and more, come to fruition and deliver the change that this Government were elected to bring, but to work with Members across the House to deliver these things together, because we need them for the benefit of all our constituents.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Christopher Chope): Unfortunately, because of the pressure on time, we have to reduce the maximum time for speeches to five minutes, but that does not apply to those making their maiden speeches.

12.55 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to be in the Chamber today, and I congratulate all new and returning Members on their election successes. It is an honour to be back in this place and to be called to speak in this debate on the King's Speech. I start by thanking my constituents in Aldridge-Brownhills for returning me to this place for a fourth time. I thank the residents of Pheasey Park Farm, Park Hall, Nether Hall and Orchard Hills for returning me for the first time following the boundary changes.

There is much to consider in this King's Speech, and rest assured that I will welcome those elements that benefit my constituents. However, my job on the Opposition Benches remains to get the best for my constituency and my constituents. Where the Government's legislation and plans harm my constituency, I will stand up and be my constituents' voice and fight for their interests. That brings me nicely on to the areas that I wish to raise today.

Starting with housing, we need homes, but we need the right homes, built in the right places and with the right infrastructure to support them and their communities, and we need local decision making. What we do not need to see is swathes of houses—the wrong homes, in the wrong mix and in the wrong place, driven by top-down mandatory targets. That is not nimbyism, but common sense. That is why I have always advocated for a brownfield-first approach, because the minute the green belt is released, that is it. When it is gone, it is gone forever, taking away the integrity of our communities and the sense of amenity and belonging, which we all believe are vital.

[Wendy Morton]

It concerns me that while Government Members say they will prioritise brownfield sites—they have coined this phrase “grey-belt land”—to meet their target, they are also telling local authorities to identify areas with green-belt collars to build on. That surely is wrong. It simply risks nibbling away at our green belt until it is gone.

The definition of green belt, in case we need a reminder, is that it is a buffer zone between towns and between towns and countryside. It is a planning tool to prevent urban sprawl. In the case of my constituency, it prevents us from being subsumed into the suburbs of a greater Birmingham. The green belt is not a nostalgic vision, but a future vision for future generations. The former mayor, Andy Street, had a vision for it. It is thanks to him, his leadership and his brownfield-first approach that we have seen 16,000 new homes built and thousands of jobs created on brownfield land, which has benefited many, including those in the Walsall borough. We need to see more of that approach. Surely we should build out the brownfield sites first before we release any green belt, with more financial incentives for land remediation funds.

We also need to understand what the new Government mean by “grey belt”. Is it simply another grey area? I, for one, sincerely hope not. One specific area that I seek clarity on is the new powers for compulsory purchase. I hope that can unlock some of the brownfield sites. In my constituency, there are some small derelict sites—often pubs in town centres—so let us look at working with local communities to unlock some of them.

Communities also need transport. It is inherently linked to communities and is key to jobs and opportunities. The Government have set out that they will get Britain moving, but I am deeply concerned, to put it mildly, that the new Labour Mayor of the West Midlands has said that he will review the decision for a train station in Aldridge. What has happened to the money that the former mayor Andy Street and I secured for that project? In the absence of any confirmation that it will be completed on time by 2027, within the budget allocated, I can only assume that the new mayor has no intention of delivering the project. It is 65 years since Aldridge had passenger trains. Today we have the track, freight trains and the land for a car park. Various partners are already working on it. It might not be a big deal to Mayor Parker, but it certainly is to the residents of Aldridge and to me.

I am conscious of time, but I want to touch briefly on crime and justice, as they matter to my constituents. Communities need police officers and police stations. I will continue my campaign to keep Aldridge police station. With a “for sale” board appearing recently at Sutton Coldfield, it is time for the Labour police and crime commissioner to come clean about his intentions for Aldridge police station. We need our police station as a base for our local bobbies, to increase the safety of our residents and to support our communities—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Christopher Chope): Order. I call Luke Myer to make his maiden speech.

1 pm

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Having listened carefully to the debate on His Majesty's Gracious Speech, I am grateful for this

opportunity to make my first speech in this Chamber. It is a privilege and an honour to represent the communities of Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland, where I was born and raised. Much of this debate has sought to pit rural and suburban against each other, but as a representative of both, I know that we can deliver for both, and that is precisely what I expect this Government to do.

Distinguished predecessors have represented my seat. In maiden speeches, politicians often say that they stand on the shoulders of giants, but rarely is it so true as in my case. My predecessor, Sir Simon Clarke, was a giant not only in physical terms but within his party, particularly in his admirable zeal for planning reform—an issue on which he campaigned and stood up to his own party. It is fitting that today's debate places such emphasis on those reforms. This Government are committed to building the homes and infrastructure that this country needs. Measures such as the planning and infrastructure Bill will start to create the jobs and growth that we need. I will push for Teesside to be at the heart of that work.

If the House will permit me, I would like to pay tribute to two other predecessors from my party. First, Tom Blenkinsop, who some in the House will remember, not only served his party and constituency but served his country in the Royal Military Police. Dr Ashok Kumar, who was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Chris McDonald) in his maiden speech, was my MP growing up. He was a tenacious constituency MP, whose model I hope to follow. Ashok once said that our constituency is a microcosm of British society. He was right. It is not particularly left or right wing, but it is full of decent people who want the best for their families.

Our identity is complex. Officially, we are in the north-east, but we are also proudly in Yorkshire, as part of the historic North Riding. We have been called Cleveland and Langbaurgh, and today we are told that we are in the Tees Valley. Whatever we call it, our home is an incredible place. My constituency sits between wildly different landscapes at each point of the compass. To the north, we find the beach, where the North sea fret washes out over the seafront at places like Skinningrove. To the south, we leave the beautiful market town of Guisborough and meet the vast, wild purple of the North York moors. To the east are the rolling fields of East Cleveland—rural North Yorkshire at its best. There are proud villages and towns from Loftus to Lingdale, Skelton to Stanghow, and Brotton, where I grew up. I am proud to be our constituency's first MP from the villages, and I hope to serve them well.

To the west, we find suburban south Middlesbrough, home to many working families and, in Marton, to the birthplace of one of this country's greatest explorers, Captain James Cook. If we venture further, those communities give way to the towering chimneys and snaking pipes of industrial Teesside, once the beating heart of Britain's economy—the “infant Hercules” as Gladstone called it. It is home to a 300-year economic relay race from one major industry to another: first fishing and agriculture, then coal, then iron and steel, and then chemicals. The saying on Teesside is, “We built the world.” Steel forged in Teesside furnaces found its way into the Sydney Harbour bridge and spanned the Victoria falls. When Churchill's war Cabinet met in

their underground bunker not far from here or when the ball hit the net at Wembley, it all happened under structures of Teesside steel.

Today, we are perfectly positioned for the green jobs of the future. We already produce around half the country's hydrogen. With the right industrial strategy, we can create jobs in hydrogen, carbon capture and storage, and clean power—wind, nuclear and solar—and in our port. If our engineering capabilities are harnessed, we can lead the world again. Legislation such as the Great British Energy Bill, the Crown Estate Bill and the planning and infrastructure Bill can deliver that.

Teesside is more than just a place; it is the people. Like steel, Teesside is an alloy—a meld of the different communities that shaped us, from the miners and the Methodists to the labourers who came from Ireland, ironworkers from Wales, sailors from Japan, Jewish refugees from the pogroms of Europe, trade unionists, chemical workers, and so on. These are the small and disparate atoms that Teesside took on and blended into our culture, strengthening it into something solid and secure, bonded together with values of fairness, respect and a collective responsibility to look out for the community. We see that today in so many local community organisations, from the Guisborough Bridge Association and East Cleveland Good Neighbours to the eco-shops we see in Marton, Coulby Newham and other places.

We know what it is like to experience economic hardship; we now have levels of poverty and destitution that have not been seen in decades. When times get tough, it is easy to fall into the habits of division and blame. It is much harder to take that common pain and channel it into a common purpose, but that is what Teessiders do best. It was there in times of economic shock, whether from globalisation or the global pandemic. It was there in the floods and the food banks. The instinct, the base code of the people of Teesside, is to come together and look out for those in need—community in the face of adversity. That is our spirit, embedded like ironstone deep in our culture—the unbowed and unbroken spirit of the infant Hercules. That is what we are about. And with the powers set out in these Bills, the devolution to take back control of services and the investment in the jobs of tomorrow, we can once again drive prosperity on Teesside and prosperity across Britain, rebuilding our communities and rebuilding our country.

1.6 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): I join the House in thanking His Majesty the King and Her Majesty the Queen for their dedicated service and continued example to us all. I welcome all the new Members to this place and I congratulate the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Luke Myer) on his maiden speech.

It is a great privilege to be returned to this House, having served the people of Rutland and Melton for four years. However, I am returned to represent the wonderful people of Rutland, Stamford and the Harborough and South Kesteven villages. I would like to take a moment to reflect on the new communities I serve, because it may not be known that service runs deep in south Lincolnshire.

In world war two, our communities on their own raised enough money for a Spitfire to fight for our country. It is also in our communities where the apple

dropped for Sir Isaac Newton in 1687. And a long, long time ago, Bytham castle was known to have a Lady Alicia, the lady of Bytham. I suspect I shall not be getting that title. [*Interruption.*] I bless you all! It is also home to Easton walled gardens, a place President Franklin D. Roosevelt described as

“a dream of Nirvana...almost too good to be true.”

So it is no surprise that Stamford's honey stone streets, whose patterns have essentially remained the same since Saxon times, often grace the pages of the best places to live in this country. It was also a filming site for “Pride and Prejudice”, “The Da Vinci Code” and “Middelmarch”. Most recently, Grimsthorpe castle was home to “Bridgerton”.

Somewhat uniquely for a parliamentary seat, Rutland and Stamford sits across three counties, Leicestershire, Rutland and Lincolnshire, so I have my work cut out for me. What unites us is the rural landscape and traditions we share: our rural way of life embodied in the fields, farms and natural environment we are blessed to inhabit and hope to bequeath to the next generation. But protecting our green and pleasant lands is not about sentimentality. Our rural environment is the true workhorse of our country. Lincolnshire and Rutland alone produce 30% of the UK's vegetables, 18% of our poultry, 30% of our turkeys and 20% of all English wheat. We are the agriculture super-producer of our country.

Yet the King's Speech offered very little for us. It continued in the same vein as the Labour party manifesto, which did not mention the word “rural” even once, by ignoring the concerns of rural communities and ignoring farmers. It has put forward a different approach to development, setting out centralised powers for Westminster to impose projects on the countryside and stripping away the voice of local people. The consequences of that approach were apparent last week when the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero imposed three mega solar plants on communities, two of which sit within Lincolnshire and Rutland.

During the last Parliament, I consistently opposed the Mallard Pass solar plant and was dismayed to see the Secretary of State wave it through after only three working days in the job. Yesterday, he referred to himself as a “super-nerd”. I would never question his self-classification, but I do question how somebody could read over 3,000 pages of quasi-judicial documentation in just that time, while also getting to grips with a new Department. That perhaps explains why he missed or ignored the fact that even the Planning Inspectorate told him to turn down one of those applications.

There are well-documented links between Uyghur forced labour and the primary developer behind Mallard Pass. Labour has said it wants a renewal in public life and a focus on public service, but I ask where the sense of duty is to responsible and considered governance when decisions are made, frankly, for a propaganda announcement to say what the Government have done in their first seven days—decisions that solely affect Conservative-voting communities. Together these three solar plants will remove 6,000 acres of good-quality agricultural land, the land that feeds our country and powers our nation.

I want to delve more into the issue of slave labour. For years I have spoken out against what is taking place in Xinjiang. This House—including the new Secretary

[Alicia Kearns]

of State for Energy Security and Net Zero—voted to declare what was taking place a genocide. In opposition, Labour promised that should they become the party of government they would not only declare it formally a genocide, but would take the Chinese Government to court—I look forward to updates on that activity—but in government they have decided to carpet our countryside with solar panels produced by the blood of Uyghur slave labourers. The company behind the Mallard Pass, Canadian Solar, was found by our Foreign Office to have the highest complicity in Uyghur forced labour. It has been sanctioned by the United States Government for its

“ongoing campaign of repression against Muslim minority groups”. This is a company whose representative rang my office and asked what I wanted to drop my opposition. Is that a company that we want operating on our land?

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her speech. Does she agree that there would be full support on the Conservative Benches for measures to ensure that the supply chain for solar panels does not include slave labour?

Alicia Kearns: I agree entirely with my right hon. Friend, who has an incredible history as one of the greatest parliamentary advocates for tackling slave labour.

Will the Minister apologise, on behalf of the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, to the 32 anti-slave labour non-governmental organisations that opposed the Mallard Pass development. Will he apologise to the British people for signing over thousands of acres of prime agricultural land to such a company, and will he apologise to the 3,400 people whose petition I presented in the Chamber, with the highest number of wet signatures ever presented in this Parliament? Does he accept that the loudest statement made last week was not that we stand four-square behind renewables in this place but that we are giving the green light to all companies complicit in Uyghur slave labour to flood our country with bloodied solar panels? This Government are happy to go green on blood labour, and I will not stand for it.

Very briefly, in respect of rural economies, I want to express my absolute opposition to the Government's intention to charge VAT on independent schools. There are 10 in my communities that employ more than 2,000 people and are attended by well over 1,000 children with special educational needs. Furthermore, one in five of my constituents who are military personnel or veterans send their children to those schools. This is ideology and dogma, and there is also no plan to support our comprehensive schools.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge) (Con): My hon. Friend is, again, making a very fine speech. She is talking not only about pressure on those families, but about any other families who will then see those children going to the state schools in the area.

Alicia Kearns: My right hon. Friend is, as usual, on point. In Rutland alone there are only three places for new children in year 9. Where are these children going to go? Why are the Government punishing parents who want the best for their children? Before Labour Members

try to suggest that I am an out-of-touch Tory, let me point out that my children go my local comprehensive, just as I did. However, I recognise that this is wrong for our country, wrong for our local education system, wrong for our military families, and wrong for those who rely on employment in our local schools. It is dogma once again, and I expected better.

The Government have shown a degree of good grace and maturity in adopting some of the previous Government's Bills for their agenda. It is a sign of political strength for a Government to acknowledge that other parties have good ideas, and to adopt them during their time in power. May I suggest that, in order to fill the blanks in their rural policy, the Government should look at ours? They should announce a £1 billion increase in the farming budget over the course of this Parliament. There should be reformed planning rules to support farming infrastructure. The introduction of legally binding food security targets should be at the heart of what the Government do, and they should recognise how much rural communities contribute to our communities. We provide the food that we eat, we offer an escape and access to nature, and we act as custodians for traditions stretching back deep into our history. I will work every single day for my communities, and I hope that the Government will see sense and do the same.

1.13 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate. Let me first thank my constituents for returning me to this place; I am representing many of them for the first time.

I wish to speak in support of the King's Speech, and to raise a number of points about issues that are important to my constituents and to many others across the country. The King's Speech set out nothing less than a programme for national renewal, presenting a chance for us to change our country for the better for the benefit of all its people, including my constituents in Reading. I want to draw on a series of examples to show just how important these measures actually are.>

I will start with the important area of infrastructure, including the need for data centres, onshore wind and new electricity connectivity. All are absolutely essential if we are to get our economy growing again after 14 years of very low growth and, indeed, austerity. Building new homes is vital for tackling the housing crisis, and I speak from great experience. Residents in Reading are under severe pressure because of the high cost of purchasing a house in the home counties, the very high cost of renting and the growing population. Thousands of local families are struggling to get on the housing ladder; they are struggling both to buy and to find good-quality rental properties.

Action to build on greyfield sites and put brownfield sites first is essential in trying to tackle this huge problem, and I will give a short example from my experience as a local councillor. One of the hardest things that I ever had to do as a councillor was to try to help families who had been moved out following no-fault evictions. It was absolutely and utterly heartbreaking to see families with both parents in work struggling to find a new place to live after being moved out by a landlord, which is the sort of issue that measures in the King's Speech will tackle. It is absolutely essential that we take this matter

forward and deal with these really pressing social problems, which affect people across our country and which are dreadful for so many families, particularly in many of the towns and cities represented on the Government Benches.

I would like to draw out a number of other measures that are important to my residents and others across the country, particularly the Government's commitment to legislate on knife crime. I have experienced appalling cases in my area, including the dreadful murder of a 13-year-old boy. I can only say that my heart goes out to any family affected by this appalling crime. The measures announced to tackle the problem through much tougher action on knives, and to provide better support for teenagers, are absolutely essential, and I hope they will be welcomed by Members of all parties.

I would also like to make a point in support of GB Energy. The Government are absolutely right to look at a new way to increase investment in green energy. We face an unprecedented crisis in the form of the climate emergency, and we must take action. It is simply vital that we move forward on this matter.

Rail renationalisation will make a huge difference to thousands of the residents I represent and, indeed, to people across the country. I echo many Members' support for rail and public transport, which plays a very important role in connecting people across this country.

Finally, I thoroughly endorse and encourage the Government's action to promote football regulation, which is long overdue. Some good work was carried out under the previous Government, and it is important that this continues. I hope that the legislation will support and help many clubs across the country that are struggling with enormous challenges, including my team, Reading football club. I look forward to hearing more on this issue later.

I am conscious of the time. I congratulate the many new Members who have spoken so eloquently today, and I thank you for the opportunity to speak, Mr Chope.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Christopher Chope): I call Alison Griffiths to make her maiden speech.

1.17 pm

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to follow so many excellent maiden speeches today—I have been taking notes.

It is a great honour to deliver my maiden speech as the Member of Parliament for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton. First, let me thank my wonderful association, my campaign team and all of those—they are too numerous to mention—who have helped me on my journey to this place. Let me also thank everyone I shall work with in the future in serving the people of Littlehampton and Bognor Regis.

Allow me to introduce my wonderful constituency. Bognor Regis has the accolade of having the most sunshine hours in Britain. William Blake, who lived down the road in Felpham, encapsulated this when he wrote:

“Heaven opens here on all sides her golden Gates”.

Residents can easily see that Blake's reference to

“England's green and pleasant land”

was surely inspired by his life there.

On the other side of the River Arun, Littlehampton is renowned for its rich nautical heritage. The harbour is central to the town's identity, and the presence of the RNLI lifeboat station underscores the importance of maritime safety. Rustington adds further to our rich tapestry. Now home to Blind Veterans UK, Rustington is a model of community cohesion and local enterprise. Its thriving high street, supported by local businesses, is a testament to what can be achieved when we invest in our towns and villages.

Bognor Regis and Littlehampton is a mosaic of vibrant villages and communities, from Aldwick and Rose Green to the rural charm of Yapton and the scenic settings of Middleton-on-Sea and Elmer. The industrious spirit of Wick and the agricultural heritage of Ford add to our picturesque patchwork. The beauty of Climping and the residential tranquillity of Felpham play a vital role in my constituency's identity.

My predecessor, Nick Gibb, served Bognor Regis and Littlehampton for 27 years with great distinction. His dedication to public service and to our constituents has set a particularly high standard, as many have told me, and in this place and in government, his reforms to education have improved the lives of an entire generation, providing our children with the opportunities they need to succeed.

Today I stand before the House to discuss an issue of utmost importance to my constituents: opposition to inappropriate development, and the preservation of our green spaces. These areas are not just stretches of land; they are the lungs of our communities. They play a crucial role in combating climate change by acting as carbon sinks and promoting biodiversity, by contributing to our national food security, and by providing essential green spaces for recreation, wildlife habitats and natural flood defences.

In Bognor Regis and Littlehampton, the floodplains and green spaces are the very foundations of our local economic ecosystem. Our constituency has already taken more than its fair share of development and has felt the adverse impacts as a consequence: increased frequent flooding; exacerbated sewage discharges, into the very sea upon which our tourist industry depends; our best beaches closed for swimming; and the destruction of natural habitats.

One of my goals is to secure the right community infrastructure to support the growing population in the homes that have already been built. It is not enough to build new homes. We must also invest in the necessary infrastructure—such as schools, healthcare, wastewater treatment and transport links—to provide a high quality of life for all our constituents. I oppose Government plans for top-down mandatory housing targets. Such targets disregard local constraints, imposing unrealistic demands on our communities. Instead, I advocate for a more localised approach to planning, where decisions are made with meaningful input from local residents and authorities.

I am deeply honoured to represent the people of Bognor Regis and Littlehampton in this House. I am humbled by the trust and confidence that the people of our community have placed in me, and I pledge to serve them with integrity and dedication. Let us all together rise to meet the soaring challenges ahead. On that note, I invoke the words of William Blake one last time:

“Great things are done when men and mountains meet”.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Christopher Chope): I call Joe Morris to make his maiden speech.

1.24 pm

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Alison Griffiths). As the representative of the largest constituency in England, I share her concern for rural communities; I share a dedication to them, and I am the product of one of them.

First of all, I would like to thank the people of the Hexham constituency for placing their faith in me this July and sending me as their representative to this place. For many, it was their first time voting for my party, and I stand here as the first ever Labour MP for the constituency. It is an honour that I will never forget. I will work as hard as I can to repay that faith in the days, months and years ahead.

I also want to pay tribute to my predecessor, Guy Opperman. Having contested an election against him, I know that despite the fact that we disagree on many things, he is an incredibly decent man. I was pleased to get to know him a bit during the campaign. I know that a high bar has been set for me as a constituency MP. He is considered on all sides of the House to be an honourable man and a good public servant. It will be hard to match his legacy.

I would like to depart a little bit from tradition and pay tribute to some of my predecessors as Labour candidates in the constituency, who for over 100 years had the often thankless task of fighting to give the people of Hexham a Labour alternative to vote for. Until July, Ian McMinn had come the closest we ever got to winning the constituency, and his daughter Kirsty proposed me as the youth officer at my first ever Labour party meeting.

I would also like to welcome the areas that were added to the constituency, including the residents of Callerton and Throckley, who had been fantastically represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) for many years. I hope to continue giving that same service to Kenton Bank Foot, Throckley, Newburn, Callerton, Woolsington and Walbottle. Longhorsley ward was previously represented by both my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) and the former Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, both of whom also served communities in Hepscott, Morpeth's Stobhill estate and Felton in their way and were great servants to those communities.

I would not be here today if it were not for the education that I received at Queen Elizabeth high school, Hexham middle school and the Sele first school in Hexham, from teachers like Alison Higgs, Robin Hodnett, Leanne Clarkson and Tony Webster. I know that a great state education has the ability to change lives and to lift and change entire areas. I want every child in the constituency to have access to the kind of education that I was lucky enough to get.

Hexham constituency is named for the town of Hexham, which boasts a wonderful abbey that has welcomed worshippers and visitors for over 1,300 years. In that time, it suffered raids, including from the forces of William Wallace. We also have one of the first ever purpose-built jails in England, and a farmers' mart that is at the heart of our rural economy.

But the constituency that I represent is much more than just one town. We extend from the Cumbrian border, where my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) and I each represent half of the village of Gilsland, through the Tyne valley and across to Callerton and Throckley in Newcastle. In the north, we border Scotland, taking in Kielder forest, where, rather aptly for England's largest constituency by area, we have England's largest forest. We are home to the largest man-made lake in northern Europe, almost 580 square miles of internationally renowned dark sky, and the Northumberland national park. We then go to our southern border, where the Allen valleys take in some of the most stunning scenery in England. We take in the Tyne valley line, Wylam, Prudhoe, Stocksfield, Riding Mill, Hexham, Haydon Bridge and Haltwhistle. We take in Ponteland and Darras Hall, and areas as diverse as Slaley and Slaggyford.

We have the UNESCO world heritage site of Hadrian's wall running through the constituency. I am in the unfortunate position, though, of being the first ever MP for Hexham not to be able to take visitors to see the iconic Sycamore gap, which we so sadly lost to future generations last year. But the wall remains, as does the beauty that draws thousands of tourists to the constituency throughout the year, supporting the local economy in towns like Haltwhistle—the centre of Britain—Bellingham, Kielder, Wark, Byrness and Otterburn. I hope to see hon. Members from across the House walking the awe-inspiring Hadrian's wall, enjoying the wonders of our dark skies, gazing at the beautiful Tyne valley from the train and taking in the joys of community life at events like Ovingham's goose fair and the Northumberland county show.

With that being said, it will be no surprise to many hon. Members, or to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who I was delighted to welcome to the constituency during the election campaign, that my constituency conjures images of the agricultural sector. We have a fantastic farming community. It has been my privilege to engage with those in it, and to get to know them over the election campaign. I know that the farming community represents the beating heart of our constituency's identity. I look forward to working with the Secretary of State, his Ministers and friends across the House to improve outcomes for UK farmers and consumers, and to address the challenges that they face.

As well as the agriculture sector, we have a large manufacturing base in the constituency. We have sites like Egger in Hexham, which has a firm focus on the sustainability of the wood-based material manufacturing sector, and Essity in Prudhoe, which produces more than 800 million toilet rolls a year. When we do our shopping, the odds are that we are elbowing someone out of the way for some of Prudhoe's finest produce. I have worked in the steel sector, and I know how important it is for the country to make things, and how important well-paid, highly skilled jobs are to communities like ours.

Alongside our large manufacturing base, my constituency has a thriving small and craft brewery scene. I was delighted to take a break from the campaign trail to attend the Corbridge beer festival, which is all about raising money for good causes and charities.

Although there is a lot of beauty in the constituency, there are huge challenges as well. We have a great local health service, but every single week, I see the need for long-term solutions to the social care crisis. Elderly residents in isolated rural communities are doubly disadvantaged, as they are hit by the rural cost of living premium and by poor public transport, and they are reliant on carers who are themselves struggling to make ends meet.

We also face an acute transport challenge. I think I am the third Member to cite George Stephenson in their maiden speech today; he was born in Wylam. The constituency's buses are too infrequent, and its trains are too regularly cancelled. I will continue my predecessor's campaign to reopen Gilsland train station, and I look forward to working with friends across the House, and with my good friend Kim McGuinness, our Mayor of the North-East, to improve transport for our rural communities.

My constituency also faces a dramatic housing shortage, with too many elderly people being unable to downsize into more appropriate homes in communities they know, and with young people being forced to move away from where they grew up. For towns like Barrasford and Humshaugh, as well as for larger towns such as Ponteland, this is a generational challenge. It is a huge concern for parents and grandparents, and it came up time and again on the doorstep during the general election.

Crime and antisocial behaviour also impact communities—from west Newcastle and the towns and villages, to the smallest and most isolated communities. I look forward to working with Susan Dungworth, our police and crime commissioner, on these matters. The cross-departmental rural crime strategy is so important. I have spoken to sheep farmers out in West Woodburn who have been struck by the attempted robbery of their quad bike.

The north-east is famous for its rivers, and the Tyne is one of the most important rivers in the country's history. It was the very artery of our industry. Wherever I went, constituents demanded that we clean up our rivers, and I am pleased to see that the Government have already got to work on delivering on that promise. I look forward to supporting that work as much as I can.

At every door I knocked on during the election campaign, I got the message for change. I know it is incredibly important to get on with that change by supporting the King's Speech, so that we become the confident, outward-looking nation that we so evidently can be. I am conscious that we cannot work miracles in this place, and as the first ever Labour MP for my constituency, I know that I was not sent to this place with an expectation of overnight success. I was sent here to get on with working with colleagues across the House to deliver genuine outcomes and genuine change for my constituents. I look forward to continuing that service.

1.33 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hexham (Joe Morris). I thank him for his full tribute to his predecessor, Guy Opperman, who was loved on both sides of the House.

Very early in my political career, in 1999, when I was first elected as a councillor, my dad told me that nothing in politics is quite as vexed as the politics of the southern area planning committee of Test Valley borough council. He was right, but I reassure the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who is responding to this debate, that the council has already modernised its planning committee. It has already taken great strides and, until the nitrate issue in the Solent hit us, it was one of the councils delivering the highest number of houses in the country, but it has faced challenges. I welcome the announcement on compulsory purchase orders and the changes that might come, but we need detail. I seek reassurance that the detail will come and will give real powers to local authorities, because Test Valley borough council has faced a challenge since 1982, when the Romsey brewery started its last brew. I was at school at the local primary school and I remember the smell well.

That brewery site has an extant planning permission that has not been built out in the last 40 years. It is a phenomenal shame to the town that every time the local council has tried to put place in a successful compulsory purchase order, the developer has simply started work on one more unit of accommodation to delay that from happening. Given the part of the country that you are from, Mr Deputy Speaker, you may be familiar with Stanborough Developments, the company that brings that curse to Romsey. Its actions mean that we have a brownfield site in the middle of the town, with extant planning permission for a project that has never been finished, and that could be providing homes for local people.

I vividly remember a Westminster Hall debate on this subject back in 2019, brought forward by my former right hon. Friend the Member for Guildford, the great Anne Milton. That was the first occasion on which I had the dubious honour of trying to both chair and speak in a debate. Alex Cunningham, the former Member for Stockton North, said that the Labour party would bring forward "penalties" for this sort of developer. I appreciate that it will require retrospective legislation, but I seek reassurance that the Labour Government will make good on the promises made by Mr Cunningham about extant planning permissions, and that we will see developers like Stanborough suitably punished.

I reassure colleagues that I will not bang on about green belt this afternoon, for the good reason that there is no green belt in Hampshire, save for a tiny corner in the very south-west, designed, as you will know, Mr Deputy Speaker, to prevent the spread of the urban conurbation of Bournemouth, which is in an entirely different county. We would love some green belt, but we simply do not have any. What we do have is an area that is under extreme water stress.

We cannot take our foot off the brakes on building without also considering where the drinking water will come from. The Abbotswood development in my constituency frequently has to have water delivered by tankers because Southern Water repeatedly fails in its duty to provide water. It is not exclusively to blame, because although water companies can be consulted on development, they have no right to say no to it. They have no ability to say, "We simply cannot deliver water to this development." In areas like the Solent, the situation will become increasingly challenging. I saw in the pages of the *Daily Mail* that the expectation is that

[*Caroline Nokes*]

southern Hampshire will take an enormous amount of development under this Government's plans. It cannot do that if those homes cannot have a water supply.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): My right hon. Friend talks about the need for proper infrastructure alongside developments. In my Basildon and Billericay constituency, around Burstead, Billericay and Laindon, there is a lot of concern about huge infrastructure going in without local consent. Do her constituents face that issue as well?

Caroline Nokes: Absolutely. Infrastructure is key to making new developments work, but we need to take communities along with us, and to work hand in hand with them.

In the debate, we have heard about villages up and down the country; they are the heart of our rural communities. Many villages in Romsey and Southampton North have worked incredibly hard to get their neighbourhood development plans in place, and held local referendums to confirm them, but now they are scared that that work will go to waste. Yet again, I seek reassurance from the Minister that that work will be upheld and cherished, because it will give us the scale and type of communities that we wish to see. When local people have been involved in the process, the Government should not turn around and tell them that their views are now irrelevant, and that a development will be imposed on them anyway.

In the minute I have left, I wish to make a couple of further points. Over the last 48 hours, a number of issues have popped into my inbox. First and foremost, there is still a problem with the quality of new builds. When houses are thrown up at speed, people are sometimes left with significant build quality problems. One gentleman emailed me yesterday saying that he had to spend £350,000—fortunately, he had insurance covering that amount—to rectify the developer's problems. In my constituency, we have sometimes seen houses torn down because the build quality was not good enough. Let us ensure that we do not see a repeat of that.

While we are talking about new-build estates, can we solve the issue of estate management companies ripping off homeowners and not bringing estates up to the quality needed if the estate is to be adopted? [*Interruption.*] I can see that the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), is taking that on her shoulders. She should believe me. I will be beating a path to her door, because there is much that still needs to be done to ensure that the housing that is delivered is of good enough quality for people to live in.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Christopher Chope): I call Elsie Blundell to make her maiden speech.

1.39 pm

Mrs Elsie Blundell (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech during this debate. I am so proud to represent Heywood and Middleton North. It

is a new constituency, comprising part of Rochdale and most of the former Heywood and Middleton seat, both in Greater Manchester.

People from my constituency have long shaped our parliamentary democracy. Heywood is the birthplace of Peter Heywood, famous for apprehending Guy Fawkes in the cellar beneath Parliament in 1605. Middleton, too, has a famous son in Sam Bamford, the radical social reformer who led a contingent of weavers from Middleton into Manchester in 1819. Their peaceful protest for political representation ended in massacre at St Peter's Field.

Spotland, in the Rochdale part of my constituency, is home to a stone road widely known as Cotton Famine Road. It is a monument to the cotton workers who lived there in the 1860s, and who bravely sided with the Union cause during the American civil war. It was a selfless act, especially as the Union side at that time was preventing goods from leaving Confederate ports. This resulted in a shortage of cotton supplies—a cotton famine—and caused unemployment, poverty and hardship across Lancashire, but support for President Lincoln and his pledge to end the slave trade held firm.

The workers' campaign was supported by Rochdale statesman and radical John Bright, of whom a sculpture can be found in the Lower Waiting Hall of Westminster Palace. Bright was a lifelong campaigner against slavery and is especially well known for his role in abolishing the corn laws, alongside another great parliamentarian, Richard Cobden, who—with apologies to my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh)—I will claim as a predecessor, as large parts of what was his constituency now fall under Heywood and Middleton North boundaries.

The history of the area I represent, then, is strongly linked to many political and social reforms in this country and around the world, and to ideals and values that we hold close to this day: that there is no place for violence in our politics; that the circumstances a person is born into must not prevent them from participating in our democracy; and that—as those cotton workers knew in the 1860s—we should be compassionate to all people regardless of race, class or any other distinction.

Alongside Heywood, Middleton and Spotland, I have the privilege of representing the former mill town of Castleton, with its proud history of manufacturing and engineering, and the fantastic villages of Bamford and Norden.

My constituency was also home to renowned architect Edgar Wood, who is widely recognised as the most advanced English architect of his time. More recently, Heywood was the birthplace of Ian Simpson—one half of SimpsonHaugh & Partners—whose buildings, such as Beetham Tower and One Blackfriars, compel people to look up to the skylines in both Manchester and London.

To this day, it is the people of Heywood and Middleton North who continue to make the place great, and I would like to use this speech to pay tribute to some of them. They include retail workers such as Robert and Brenda Bell from Heywood, who are also proud trade unionists, for whom the employment rights Bill, set out in the King's Speech, will create extra rights to work flexibly and make parental leave, sick pay and protection from unfair dismissal day-one rights. This Government will also ban zero-hours contracts and fire and rehire.

Then there are the many volunteers, including the Pullen family, who run the 1st Heywood Scouts Group; Howard Bowden and Simon Bennett, who do excellent work through the Friends of Jubilee Park group and St Edmund's church; and Pete Knowles and his group of volunteers at Stoney Hill community wildlife area, who protect and promote our beautiful meadows and woodlands and make sure that children in a relatively urban area can access nature too. People like these make my constituency great, and I will do everything that I can to support them.

I would like to pay tribute to my predecessors. Chris Clarkson has represented the people of Heywood and Middleton for the past four and a half years. I know that many Members of this House valued his good humour and enjoyed working alongside him, including on the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee.

Liz McInnes was the MP for Heywood and Middleton between 2014 and 2019, and served in two shadow ministerial roles. Liz worked incredibly hard in both of those positions and was a fierce advocate for her constituents on many issues, including the NHS, in which she had previously worked.

For the past seven years, I have enjoyed a career in transport planning. I am incredibly pleased by the measures set out in the King's Speech to accelerate infrastructure delivery and to improve our transport network. Unfortunately, many people in my constituency do not have access to the opportunities and jobs they need, as Heywood and Middleton—despite their location in the great, modern city region of Greater Manchester—are two of the largest towns in the north-west of England not to be served by a rail station or Metrolink tram stop. As one former shadow Chancellor, Ed Balls, argued in a recent paper, there has been too little transport investment in low-productivity areas such as mine. We need to improve transport connectivity throughout city regions like Greater Manchester because good transport infrastructure allows for more frequent interaction between people and creates larger pools of workers for businesses.

Earlier this month, we received promising news from the Greater Manchester combined authority of a re-commitment to the linking of Middleton into Greater Manchester's Metrolink network and of progress on plans for Heywood's tram-train connection. In future, that will form part of the city region's integrated transport network, which Greater Manchester must carry on delivering at pace, to boost productivity, pay, jobs and living standards in Heywood and Middleton North.

Finally, when it comes to devolution for our city region the job is well under way, but we must be mindful of the fact that it is not yet finished. I look forward to supporting our new Government, because I know that, through the English devolution Bill and other measures, they will put power back into the hands of working people and money back into their pockets. They will strive to ensure that powerful forces are not able to disenfranchise those people again. Throughout history, my constituents have had too much experience of that.

I thank right hon. and hon. Members for their attention, and I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my first contribution.

1.46 pm

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I welcome the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton North (Mrs Blundell), who gave a wonderful speech. It was interesting to hear about her constituency; I confess that I did not know much about it before, but I certainly know a lot about it now. It was generous of the hon. Lady to pay rightful compliments to her predecessor, Chris Clarkson, who is much missed on this side of the House.

A couple of weeks ago, the Labour party won a mandate for the manifesto that it put before the British electorate. We respect that; it was part of the British parliamentary system and we respect the peaceful transfer of power. However, I say gently to the Labour Government that it is concerning that the King's Speech and subsequent comments from Ministers have rejected the notion that local communities should be at the heart of developments in their areas.

One particular issue affects my constituency of South Leicestershire: the proposed Hinckley national rail freight interchange. On 8 July, the new Chancellor stated that she would ask the Secretary of State for Transport, who will make the decision on the interchange, and the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero to "prioritise decisions on infrastructure projects that have been sitting unresolved for far too long."

She did not, of course, explain what she meant by "sitting unresolved for far too long", but let me help the new Chancellor and Government. "Sitting unresolved for far too long" is perhaps an unfortunate euphemism; what should actually be said is that in our system of laws we respect and listen to local communities. We listen to stakeholder groups and neighbourhood groups. Of course, in most instances local authorities—elected councillors—are, in most planning instances, the ones whose remit it is to make these decisions.

On the issue of the Hinckley national rail freight interchange, I should say that South Leicestershire already has its fair share of developments. It has one of the largest housing developments in Leicestershire, with New Lubbesthorpe; and Magna Park, one of the largest logistics parks in Europe, is to be doubled in size. It has Bruntingthorpe aerodrome, which plays host to many industrial activities, and it has the prospect of a new village—Whetstone Gorse or Whetstone Pastures.

It is not nimbyism in South Leicestershire that has led to the objections to the Hinckley national rail freight interchange; it is the fact that there are five other rail freight interchanges within a radius of 30 miles of South Leicestershire. I am glad the new Deputy Prime Minister has taken a seat to listen to my speech about this matter, but it is important that the Labour Government listen not just to me and my constituents, but to Leicestershire county council, to Warwickshire county council and even to Labour-led Rugby council, all of which have raised issues with the planning process for this unwelcome proposal.

Mr Holden: Can my hon. Friend confirm that that decision is now with a Labour Minister to make at a national level, overriding those local concerns?

Alberto Costa: My hon. Friend is quite right: the decision now rests with the new Labour Government to make. I am afraid that Labour councillors and other Labour activists who might have opposed the Hinckley

[*Alberto Costa*]

national rail freight interchange should look now to their party colleagues in government, who will be making this decision within a matter of a few weeks.

I urge the Government to listen to the people of South Leicestershire and the stakeholders I have mentioned. I urge them to listen to the people of Elme Thorpe, Sapcote, Sharnford, Aston Flamville and Stoney Stanton, and to the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), who himself has made some valuable comments against the proposed rail freight interchange. It is a deeply unwelcome proposal.

I want to offer a solution to the new Labour Government. Before they recommend this unwelcome development for approval, I suggest the relevant Minister meets me and the stakeholders, including Labour-run Rugby council, to discuss the proposal. They could perhaps look at drafting a national planning framework for the proper location of rail freight interchanges, rather than just riding roughshod over the views of the people of South Leicestershire, as a constituent of mine emailed me two hours ago to say he fears, and as I fear, the Labour Government will do.

1.52 pm

Mary Glendon (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): It is a great honour to be in the Chamber to hear so many wonderful maiden speeches, especially those of my north-east colleagues. They have made me very proud today, and I think they are going to be fantastic representatives of all their constituents.

This is my fifth election to Westminster, but my constituency has changed, with only four wards from my former North Tyneside constituency and six wards added from the former Newcastle upon Tyne East constituency. I thank the people of my former constituency for giving me the honour of serving them for the past 14 years, and I thank the people of the new constituency for placing their trust in me at the general election. I will work hard to honour that trust.

Voters in the former Newcastle upon Tyne East constituency were fortunate to be represented for 41 years by the right hon. Nick Brown, who commanded great respect in this House. Constituents hold him in high regard for all his work and achievements, both in the constituency and as a Minister in the last Labour Government. He has earned his well-deserved retirement, but personally I am grateful to Nick for all his help and friendship.

Across my new constituency, people face the same challenges—the cost of living crisis, a shortage of good social housing, hikes in mortgages and diminished public services—and they have all taken a toll on people's everyday lives. My constituency is crying out for this Labour Government's shared mission of renewal. I share the view of our new North East Mayor, Kim McGuinness, in fully supporting the English devolution Bill. Kim believes that her office will be the delivery arm of the Labour mission in the north-east, and she is keen to start that work at pace. Although I know it will not be easy, I have great hope that the announcements made in the King's Speech will start to turn the tide and make life better for everyone in this country.

I was a North Tyneside ward councillor for 15 years before I entered the House, so I have a self-confessed bias for North Tyneside council. The council's planning committee has not voted against offers or recommendations on any medium or large house building site for over a decade. It has an up-to-date local plan and ambitious housing targets of its own, yet it still has sites stuck in the planning system. Although National Highways agreed in the local plan that strategic sites should proceed and be accommodated in road infrastructure, when it came to planning applications being submitted, National Highways placed a holding objection on the sites, leading to 5,000 new homes being stuck in the system. Alongside dealing with other planning reform issues, I ask Ministers to look at the impact of statutory consultees on delays in the planning system, to help authorities such as North Tyneside.

The Health Equals campaign coalition, which is made up of 27 organisations, has launched its visually thought-provoking campaign, "Make Health Equal", to highlight the fact that levels of poverty and deprivation lead to people in parts of my constituency and other such areas living 16 years less than people in more affluent parts of the country. The coalition acknowledges that the King's Speech will start to repair some of the building blocks of health, such as decent and secure housing, good work opportunities and clean transport. It looks to the Government to assess the impact of the King's Speech on health inequalities, and, in the spirit of unity, to work with such groups to deliver the mission in my constituency and across the country.

I also make a plea on behalf of the offshore energy industries. Although the Great British Energy Bill is welcome, we must not lose sight of the fact that oil and gas play a massive part in our economy, and will continue to do so. On the tobacco and vapes Bill, I hope that the Government will, unlike the previous Government, take into account the views of the industry.

I look forward to supporting the King's Speech in the voting Lobby, along with my 411 colleagues and, hopefully, Members of the Opposition. In so doing, we will vote for an agenda fixed on making the lives of everyone in this country far better.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Christopher Chope): I call Lewis Cocking to make his maiden speech.

1.57 pm

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): I congratulate all Members who have made their maiden speeches today. I am a geographer by background, so it is an absolute privilege to sit here and learn about all the different parts of our lovely United Kingdom.

It is truly the greatest honour of my life to stand here as the Member of Parliament for Broxbourne. I am under no illusion about the responsibility of representing the place where I was raised, where my family lives and that I call home. I am hugely grateful to the residents of Broxbourne, who put their faith in me and elected one of their own. They will be keeping me on my toes—not least my nan, who will not hesitate to badger me if she thinks I need to get things sorted.

We are straight-talkers in Broxbourne, and chief among us was my predecessor, Sir Charles Walker. He certainly was not afraid to speak his mind in this Chamber. More than a decade ago, I was lucky enough to do some work

experience in Sir Charles's office here in Parliament. I simply would not be here today without the opportunities and wisdom that he offered over the years. Sir Charles had a number of triumphs in Broxbourne, and I was grateful to join him and our community in our efforts to save Cheshunt urgent care centre in 2011 and to stop the energy-from-waste facility in Hoddesdon in 2017.

I joined Sir Charles on many occasions out on the doorstep. The December 2019 general election campaign in particular sticks in the mind. Despite the darkness and the cold, the ever-enthusiastic Sir Charles ploughed on. On one occasion, it was just the two of us, and all of a sudden, Charles slipped and fell. I gasped and said, "Charles, please don't injure yourself when you're just with me, or they'll be saying I did it to get the seat."

Sir Charles served Broxbourne for 19 years, and although I knew him well, it is only in the short time since my election that I have come to understand just how much of an impact he had on this House. As Chair of the Procedure Committee and, later, the Administration Committee, Sir Charles championed the institution of Parliament and the individuals who make it. That has been made clear to me from the reactions of House staff when they discover that I represent Broxbourne. I will do my utmost to follow him in taking my responsibilities of scrutiny and representation seriously.

As I have said, Broxbourne is my home and the place I love. The constituency is characterised by its closeness to both London and the countryside, with the Lee Valley regional park on our doorstep. In 2012, Broxbourne became an Olympic borough: we hosted the canoe events at our world-class Lee Valley white water rafting centre, and we have a gold post box in Cheshunt thanks to our very own Laura Kenny's success in the cycling. There are a number of Team GB athletes with connections to Broxbourne heading to the summer Olympics, and I wish them all the best.

The area has many small independent businesses, particularly around our towns of Waltham Cross, Cheshunt and Hoddesdon. They are the backbone of Broxbourne's local economy, and I will do all I can to support entrepreneurship at every level. I am also proud of the international investment coming to the constituency over the next few years. I am pleased to say that Hollywood is coming to Broxbourne: a £700 million project is well under way to build a film studio complex, which will have the capacity to produce four blockbusters at the same time.

At this election, the constituency of Broxbourne took on the villages of Stanstead Abbots, St Margarets, Hertford Heath, Great Amwell and Brickendon. These villages are all known for their tight-knit communities and natural beauty, which brings me on to the topic of this debate. While preparing for this speech, I noticed that both of the former MPs for Broxbourne referred to the unspoiled green belt that we are lucky to have in our area. Broxbourne has a local plan and has built hundreds of new homes—too many in a short space of time, some of my constituents would argue, and too many in total. I tend to agree. As many Members who are councillors will have seen if they have sat on a planning committee, developers use outline planning permission to promise the world. I have seen houses in outline that look absolutely amazing: the development has schools, new roads, a local centre and healthcare facilities. However, once outline planning permission has been granted, the

developers come forward for full planning permission, and nine times out of 10 the application looks incredibly different, with bad design and no infrastructure. And developers wonder why residents get up in arms!

We need to better link the NHS to new developments. On several occasions, getting local NHS providers to tell us what they need, or even getting them around the table so that we can plan new services for my constituents, has been a real struggle. I have a real issue in Goffs Oak and the wider west Cheshunt area, which has seen a lot of new housing but no new healthcare facilities. It is obvious to everyone living there that those facilities are desperately needed.

We must ensure that developments are acceptable—not development anywhere, but appropriate development in the right places. Infrastructure must come first, with new schools, GP surgeries and section 106 moneys up front, or as close to day one as possible. Above all else, we must ensure that local people have a say over development in their area, so I hope the Government will listen to local people. On this and other issues, I assure my constituents that I will be their voice in this place, and I hope I can begin to repay their trust as my hard work starts now.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Christopher Chope): I call Peter Prinsley to make his maiden speech.

2.4 pm

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): I am a surgeon from East Anglia, and it is an honour beyond my imagining to have been elected to Parliament to serve the people of Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket in the most beautiful county of Suffolk. I thank its voters for putting their faith in me and in Labour, and for giving us the chance to change Britain. I am the first ever Labour Member of Parliament for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket, which has been a Conservative seat for nigh on 150 years.

I must thank my predecessor, Jo Churchill, most sincerely for her long service to her constituents. I am the first ear, nose and throat surgeon ever elected to Parliament. I am not, however, the first member of my family to be an MP. I recall my uncle, George Jeger, from when I was a small boy in the 1960s—he was the Member for Goole, in the East Riding of Yorkshire.

I thank my teachers at Guisborough grammar school in Cleveland. As a descendant of Jewish refugees, what a pleasure it was to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Luke Myer) deliver his maiden speech. I went to medical school in Sheffield, and I thank the many surgeons who trained me in the NHS. I thank the thousands of patients whom I have treated during my career, and who put their faith in me and are my lasting inspiration. Indeed, one of the first people I met as I walked into Parliament was one of my patients, Paul from Great Yarmouth, who works here in this place to keep us all safe. I thank my family and in particular my wife, Marian, the former sheriff of Norwich, who has been my greatest supporter and who first encouraged me in politics.

My constituency of Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket is a wonderful part of the world, with a rich tradition of agriculture and food production. We are home to Greene King and, according to the records in the House of Commons Library, one of my distinguished predecessors

[*Peter Prinsley*]

urged the House bars to stock the delicious beer created from Suffolk barley. I see that the present Greene King brew in the Strangers' Bar is called Level Head—something we are all going to need in the years to come as we begin to rebuild Britain. We are also home to Silver Spoon, and the enormous Suffolk sugar beet production is key to the local economy. In Stowmarket, we have a brilliant food museum to showcase that most essential of national services, farming.

I was delighted to see our new Government's proposals to sort out our buses. Let us think of them as the crucial services they are and support them. There are villages in my constituency that have two buses a day during the school term and no buses at all in the school holidays. How does anyone without a car get to the GP surgery or to the pharmacy in the nearby town?

Very few surgeons are ever elected to Parliament and I will bring my experience of 42 years as an NHS doctor to this place to do something to help mend a service that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has described as broken. Many of our hospitals are indeed in poor repair and we have seen very little progress on the 40 new hospitals famously promised by the last Government. In Bury St Edmunds, we urgently need to confirm the capital funding to progress the replacement of the West Suffolk hospital which, like my own James Paget university hospital in Great Yarmouth and our sister hospital in King's Lynn, is supported by thousands of scaffolding poles and is literally falling down. Last week, it was reported that bird droppings had fallen through the roof on to sterile surgical instruments. My predecessor was a strong advocate for the replacement of our hospital, and I will aim to continue her work.

Our brilliant new Government have much to do. Let us use our huge mandate wisely. Let us look after the staff who look after us, end the outrage of food banks for the nurses in many of our hospitals, and sort out the pay and conditions of all who work in our most precious of public services. Let us make the biggest employer in the land the very best employer in the land.

There are things to do to sort out social care and to end the financial lottery at the end of life, which many families fear. The answers are political, and we can do this. Our hospitals are full of patients with a non-medical condition called bed block, because they cannot be discharged safely in many cases. I cannot begin to tell the House how many of my operating lists have been cancelled because of that problem. Whole surgical teams are waiting around for hours and operating theatres are lying empty. If we solve the problem of social care, we will not need to build ever bigger hospitals.

But I am optimistic for our NHS. Britain leads the world in scientific advances. Right in my own region of East Anglia we have world-beating biomedical science and leading universities.

Recently, we celebrated 75 years of the NHS. My father—who, if he were alive and here today, would be astonished—was an RAF medic who joined the RAF in 1948. My son is an A&E doctor right here in London. My sister is a nurse. My family has served the NHS continuously since it began.

When the great Nye Bevan invented the NHS, a painful hip was treated with a walking stick, and a cataract with a thick pair of glasses. Now the miracles of joint replacement and cataract surgery are no longer regarded as the surgical miracles they are, but as an entitlement. Nye would have been amazed.

I am sure we will see in our own time scientific and medical advances beyond our imagination. Already we are at last seeing effective treatments for dementia and neurological disorders, and genetic cures for haemophilia and other inherited problems. We will also have cancer vaccines and other marvels that we cannot yet imagine.

I urge all my honourable colleagues in this brand-new Parliament to do whatever we can to support research and innovation with all our heart and all our soul, for as the great poet Seamus Heaney wrote,

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And hope and history rhyme.”

I commend this King's Speech to the House.

2.11 pm

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I begin by congratulating the Secretary of State and the ministerial team on their appointments and wishing them well. I also pay tribute to the hon. Members for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) and for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones), who did a lot of the hard yards in opposition and missed out on ministerial roles this time.

I pay tribute to the excellent maiden speeches we have heard on both sides of the House today. We started with the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth), who I was delighted to hear has significant rural areas in his constituency and has an interest in this sector. We heard from the hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur), who gave the House an informed tour of his constituency. We had a fantastic speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross), who brings real practical and professional experience to rural affairs and rightly focused on the need to tailor policies to the needs of rural communities.

We heard from the new hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Luke Myer), who was very generous in his tribute to his much-respected predecessor. We had a brilliant speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Alison Griffiths), who highlighted the importance of the rural economy and water quality—what an asset she will be in the House. We also heard from the hon. Member for Hexham (Joe Morris), who talked about farming as the beating heart of his constituency, while the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton North (Mrs Blundell) spoke about the radicalism of a former figure from Middleton—I hope that will inform her relationship with the Government Whips Office moving forward.

We had two outstanding closing speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking) spoke about the importance of infrastructure in the rural economy, and focused particularly on planning. We also witnessed the huge experience, which is respected across the House, that the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) brings as

a surgeon. I know he will be an important voice in health debates, among others. I am delighted that all those new Members chose to make their maiden speeches on the issue of rural affairs in the King's Speech.

Labour campaigned on a slogan of change, but they are offering only uncertainty to farming and fishing communities. It is no surprise that, just last night, the president of the National Farmers Union said that farmers are facing a "cliff edge" and are "being kept up at night"

by the uncertainty. That uncertainty is not because the Labour Government have not had time to prepare their policies for farming and fishing; it is because the issue is not a priority for a Labour Government. That is why the Labour manifesto had just 87 words on farming and nothing at all on fishing. It is why this King's Speech has nothing for the farming and fishing communities. It is why the Government have not even given any dates for when this uncertainty will end. We should be clear in this House that that is an active choice. It is a point that the Government have chosen to prioritise, in contrast to the prioritisation we were willing to make with the additional funding that we committed.

Is it not all the more ironic that just a few years ago, the now Prime Minister went to the NFU and admitted that farming and rural affairs had for too long been an afterthought for the Labour party and promised to change that? That is an early example of promised change that is not then delivered. We can see that uncertainty in the farming budget. The Government have made no commitment to what the budget will be, or whether they are continuing it or increasing it. We were willing to make decisions to prioritise £1 billion of additional funding over this Parliament. There is nothing from Labour on that, leaving farmers uncertain. Can the Secretary of State confirm what his budget will be? Does he even know? Has the Chancellor told him? Can he even tell the House when he might know? We do not even know when the spending review will be. He is probably as much in the dark as the rest of us.

What about the uncertainty on food security? We made commitments with the food security index, the annual farm to fork summit, the food security duty, the biggest ever grants payment, and the additional funding to deal with the wet weather that farmers had recently faced. What is the commitment from the Labour Government on food security? There is nothing in the King's Speech about legislating for that. Can the Secretary of State confirm whether they intend to legislate and it was just an omission that they did not get around to, or is it something that he is now ruling out?

What about the uncertainty about just how much farmland will be lost as a result of this Government? We know what their 2030 environmental targets are—to triple solar, to increase onshore wind and to increase the pylons connecting to offshore wind—so can the Secretary of State confirm to the House that he will publish before the summer recess an impact assessment on how much farmland will be lost as a result of delivering his 2030 environmental targets? Does he even know?

Mr Holden: One cornerstone of the Conservative manifesto was for an underground-first approach to new electricity pylons. That is an important matter for my constituents in Basildon and Billericay. Will my

right hon. Friend also highlight to the Government exactly how important that is and try to seek an answer on what their proposals are in this space?

Steve Barclay: My right hon. Friend gets to the nub of the issue, because if a Government are promising change, they need to be able to say what the timelines are. They need to say what the budget is and what legislation they will pass to deliver that. On all those things, there is silence in this King's Speech.

The Labour manifesto has lots of high-sounding things that are hard to disagree with. Labour wants more food security, and says that food security is national security, and we on the Opposition Benches agree. Labour says it wants to raise animal welfare, and we have done a huge amount to do so. That is fine. However, if the Government say they want to end the badger cull, when will they do that? There is nothing in the King's Speech on that, so what are the timelines? Dairy farmers would like to know. Will the Secretary of State publish the analysis from the chief veterinary officer on what the impact of ending the cull would be on the trajectory? We know that the current approach has seen TB cases come down in England from 34,500 in 2018 to below 20,000. Certainly the advice that I had was that vaccinations would not be ready for some time. Will he publish the trajectory and tell us when the cull will end?

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): You need to respect the science.

Steve Barclay: Of course we respect the science. The hon. Gentleman chunters from a sedentary position, but I presume he will get the same science brief—in a way, he makes my point—that I got from the chief vet, which was that the vaccinations were not ready and the cull was being effective. In fact, we only need to look at Labour's policy in Wales, where the opposite is happening, to see that. I hope that, as he represents Cambridge, he will follow the science, because the Government made a commitment that does not. Perhaps that is the sort of change they mean—a change from what they committed to in the manifesto. It did not take long.

Speaking of things at a high level that no one can disagree with, the Government talk about making more use of public sector procurement. Again, the Conservatives not only agree with that, but we have helped the Government with it. The former Member for Colchester did a fantastic review, the Quince review, looking at how that will be done, but the Government are silent on the funding for that. Will it be funded out of the budget of the Department for Health and Social Care, the Department for Education, the Ministry of Defence, local government—or will it come out of the Secretary of State's budget? It is difficult for him to say, because he does not even know what his budget will be.

The reality is that we have empty slogans from a party that does not care about the rural economy. The Government are not giving clarity to farming and fishing; they barely mentioned farming in their manifesto, and they did not even mention fishing. This King's Speech does nothing for the farming and fishing communities. The decisions that we have seen so far take vast amounts of farmland out of food production in order to prioritise the eco-zealotry that we have heard so often in this House. I hope the Secretary of State will give the clarity

[Steve Barclay]

that is sadly lacking in the King's Speech on what the Government will do—and when—on the budget, on food procurement, and on dairy farmers and the badger cull, and will end the uncertainty that the president of the NFU and so many others in the farming and fishing community currently face.

2.20 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): It is a huge honour, on my first opportunity to speak from the Dispatch Box as the Secretary of State, to close today's debate on His Majesty's Gracious Speech. I welcome my predecessor, now the shadow Secretary of State, to his place and thank him for the way he has worked constructively with me. I look forward to that continuing, although I prefer it this way around.

It has been an honour to be present for maiden speeches from across the House. Unfortunately, I do not have the time to go through their excellent comments in much detail, but I would like to mention my hon. Friends the Members for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth), for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur), for Cramlington and Killingworth (Emma Foody), for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Luke Myer), for Hexham (Joe Morris), for Heywood and Middleton North (Mrs Blundell) and for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley). Many of them represent rural constituencies, and they all showed what great assets they will be to this House and to the communities they represent.

I cannot respond to everyone who has spoken—I am sorry about that—but I will do my best to cover what I can in the limited time available. I will start with the subject of planning. This Government were elected on a mandate to get Britain building again. As the Deputy Prime Minister said, reforming the planning system is the key to unlocking our country's economic growth. The existing planning system is too restrictive, slow and uncertain, which undermines investor confidence and means that the homes that we desperately need do not get built. We will overhaul the planning system to tackle the chronic shortage of homes and power up the economy.

Alongside that, we were elected on a platform to deliver for nature, and will take urgent action to meet the Environment Act targets that the previous Government missed. We will protect, create and improve spaces that increase climate resilience and promote nature's recovery on land and at sea, recognising that ensuring a positive outcome for nature is fundamental to unlocking the housing and infrastructure that this country so urgently needs.

We must take tough action to tackle the housing emergency and build the 1.5 million homes that we need over this Parliament, but we remain committed to preserving the green belt. Our brownfield-first approach means that that authorities should prioritise brownfield sites. However, brownfield development alone will not be enough, so we will also transform lower-quality grey belt land, such as wasteland or old car parks, into housing, including affordable homes for those most in need.

Mr Holden *rose*—

Steve Reed: I am sorry, there is not enough time for me to give way. [Interruption.] Members should have spoken for less time.

Rural communities have been severely undermined by the previous Conservative Government. For a party that once claimed to be the party of the countryside, their track record is one of abject and absolute neglect. Voters in the countryside rejected their failure and embraced Labour's positive vision. That is evident from the huge increase in Labour MPs representing rural constituencies, and the collapse in rural support for the Conservatives. Thanks to the Conservative party, transport links in many rural areas are now close to non-existent; there are more potholes in England's roads than craters on the moon; schools cannot recruit enough teachers; GP surgeries are full; families cannot find an NHS dentist; thousands of rural businesses have collapsed; and rural crime goes unpunished. This is an abandonment of the countryside on a historic scale.

If we solve the problem of social care, we will not need to build ever bigger hospitals.

But I am optimistic for our NHS. Britain leads the world in scientific advances. Right in my own region of East Anglia we have world-beating biomedical science and leading universities.

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We had two outstanding closing speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking) spoke about the importance of infrastructure in the rural economy, and focused particularly on planning. We also witnessed the huge experience, which is respected across the House, that the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) brings as a surgeon. I know he will be an important voice in health debates, among others. I am delighted that all those new Members chose to make their maiden speeches on the issue of rural affairs in the King's Speech.

Labour campaigned on a slogan of change, but they are offering only uncertainty to farming and fishing communities. It is no surprise that, just last night, the president of the National Farmers Union said that farmers are facing a “cliff edge” and are “being kept up at night”

by the uncertainty. That uncertainty is not because the Labour Government have not had time to prepare their policies for farming and fishing; it is because the issue is not a priority for a Labour Government. That is why the Labour manifesto had just 87 words on farming and nothing at all on fishing. It is why this King's Speech has nothing for the farming and fishing communities. It is why the Government have not even given any dates for when this uncertainty will end. We should be clear in this House that that is an active choice. It is a point that the Government have chosen to prioritise, in contrast to the prioritisation we were willing to make with the additional funding that we committed.

Is it not all the more ironic that just a few years ago, the now Prime Minister went to the NFU and admitted that farming and rural affairs had for too long been an afterthought for the Labour party and promised to change that? That is an early example of promised change that is not then delivered. We can see that uncertainty in the farming budget. The Government have made no commitment to what the budget will be, or whether they are continuing it or increasing it. We were willing to make decisions to prioritise £1 billion of additional funding over this Parliament. There is nothing

from Labour on that, leaving farmers uncertain. Can the Secretary of State confirm what his budget will be? Does he even know? Has the Chancellor told him? Can he even tell the House when he might know? We do not even know when the spending review will be. He is probably as much in the dark as the rest of us.

What about the uncertainty on food security? We made commitments with the food security index, the annual farm to fork summit, the food security duty, the biggest ever grants payment, and the additional funding to deal with the wet weather that farmers had recently faced. What is the commitment from the Labour Government on food security? There is nothing in the King's Speech about legislating for that. Can the Secretary of State confirm whether they intend to legislate and it was just an omission that they did not get around to, or is it something that he is now ruling out?

What about the uncertainty about just how much farmland will be lost as a result of this Government? We know what their 2030 environmental targets are—to triple solar, to increase onshore wind and to increase the pylons connecting to offshore wind—so can the Secretary of State confirm to the House that he will publish before the summer recess an impact assessment on how much farmland will be lost as a result of delivering his 2030 environmental targets? Does he even know?

Mr Holden: One cornerstone of the Conservative manifesto was for an underground-first approach to new electricity pylons. That is an important matter for my constituents in Basildon and Billericay. Will my right hon. Friend also highlight to the Government exactly how important that is and try to seek an answer on what their proposals are in this space?

Steve Barclay: My right hon. Friend gets to the nub of the issue, because if a Government are promising change, they need to be able to say what the timelines are. They need to say what the budget is and what legislation they will pass to deliver that. On all those things, there is silence in this King's Speech.

The Labour manifesto has lots of high-sounding things that are hard to disagree with. Labour wants more food security, and says that food security is national security, and we on the Opposition Benches agree. Labour says it wants to raise animal welfare, and we have done a huge amount to do so. That is fine. However, if the Government say they want to end the badger cull, when will they do that? There is nothing in the King's Speech on that, so what are the timelines? Dairy farmers would like to know. Will the Secretary of State publish the analysis from the chief veterinary officer on what the impact of ending the cull would be on the trajectory? We know that the current approach has seen TB cases come down in England from 34,500 in 2018 to below 20,000. Certainly the advice that I had was that vaccinations would not be ready for some time. Will he publish the trajectory and tell us when the cull will end?

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): You need to respect the science.

Steve Barclay: Of course we respect the science. The hon. Gentleman chunters from a sedentary position, but I presume he will get the same science brief—in a

[Steve Barclay]

way, he makes my point—that I got from the chief vet, which was that the vaccinations were not ready and the cull was being effective. In fact, we only need to look at Labour's policy in Wales, where the opposite is happening, to see that. I hope that, as he represents Cambridge, he will follow the science, because the Government made a commitment that does not. Perhaps that is the sort of change they mean—a change from what they committed to in the manifesto. It did not take long.

Speaking of things at a high level that no one can disagree with, the Government talk about making more use of public sector procurement. Again, the Conservatives not only agree with that, but we have helped the Government with it. The former Member for Colchester did a fantastic review, the Quince review, looking at how that will be done, but the Government are silent on the funding for that. Will it be funded out of the budget of the Department for Health and Social Care, the Department for Education, the Ministry of Defence, local government—or will it come out of the Secretary of State's budget? It is difficult for him to say, because he does not even know what his budget will be.

The reality is that we have empty slogans from a party that does not care about the rural economy. The Government are not giving clarity to farming and fishing; they barely mentioned farming in their manifesto, and they did not even mention fishing. This King's Speech does nothing for the farming and fishing communities. The decisions that we have seen so far take vast amounts of farmland out of food production in order to prioritise the eco-zealotry that we have heard so often in this House. I hope the Secretary of State will give the clarity that is sadly lacking in the King's Speech on what the Government will do—and when—on the budget, on food procurement, and on dairy farmers and the badger cull, and will end the uncertainty that the president of the NFU and so many others in the farming and fishing community currently face.

2.20 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): It is a huge honour, on my first opportunity to speak from the Dispatch Box as the Secretary of State, to close today's debate on His Majesty's Gracious Speech. I welcome my predecessor, now the shadow Secretary of State, to his place and thank him for the way he has worked constructively with me. I look forward to that continuing, although I prefer it this way around.

It has been an honour to be present for maiden speeches from across the House. Unfortunately, I do not have the time to go through their excellent comments in much detail, but I would like to mention my hon. Friends the Members for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth), for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur), for Cramlington and Killingworth (Emma Foody), for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Luke Myer), for Hexham (Joe Morris), for Heywood and Middleton North (Mrs Blundell) and for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley). Many of them represent rural constituencies, and they all showed what great assets they will be to this House and to the communities they represent.

I cannot respond to everyone who has spoken—I am sorry about that—but I will do my best to cover what I can in the limited time available. I will start with the subject of planning. This Government were elected on a mandate to get Britain building again. As the Deputy Prime Minister said, reforming the planning system is the key to unlocking our country's economic growth. The existing planning system is too restrictive, slow and uncertain, which undermines investor confidence and means that the homes that we desperately need do not get built. We will overhaul the planning system to tackle the chronic shortage of homes and power up the economy.

Alongside that, we were elected on a platform to deliver for nature, and will take urgent action to meet the Environment Act targets that the previous Government missed. We will protect, create and improve spaces that increase climate resilience and promote nature's recovery on land and at sea, recognising that ensuring a positive outcome for nature is fundamental to unlocking the housing and infrastructure that this country so urgently needs.

We must take tough action to tackle the housing emergency and build the 1.5 million homes that we need over this Parliament, but we remain committed to preserving the green belt. Our brownfield-first approach means that that authorities should prioritise brownfield sites. However, brownfield development alone will not be enough, so we will also transform lower-quality grey belt land, such as wasteland or old car parks, into housing, including affordable homes for those most in need.

Mr Holden *rose*—

Steve Reed: I am sorry, there is not enough time for me to give way. [*Interruption.*] Members should have spoken for less time.

Rural communities have been severely undermined by the previous Conservative Government. For a party that once claimed to be the party of the countryside, their track record is one of abject and absolute neglect. Voters in the countryside rejected their failure and embraced Labour's positive vision. That is evident from the huge increase in Labour MPs representing rural constituencies, and the collapse in rural support for the Conservatives. Thanks to the Conservative party, transport links in many rural areas are now close to non-existent; there are more potholes in England's roads than craters on the moon; schools cannot recruit enough teachers; GP surgeries are full; families cannot find an NHS dentist; thousands of rural businesses have collapsed; and rural crime goes unpunished. This is an abandonment of the countryside on a historic scale.

Yet instead of apologising for their failure, the Conservatives choose to deny the reasons why rural voters turned against them in their millions. They are at it again today. I take it from the comments the shadow Secretary of State was making just now that they are so out of touch that they do not understand that rural communities want more affordable homes, more dentists, more teachers, more GPs, better public transport, energy security, more digital connectivity, well-paid jobs, better access to the countryside all around them, and their rivers cleaned up, after the Tories left them swilling with raw, stinking toxic sewage. They are out of touch, out of ideas and now, thank goodness, out of office.

This week, Britain starts a new chapter. Rural communities will be central to our mission to rebuild Britain and fix the issues that make a real difference to people's everyday lives, as we grow the economy, mend the NHS, fix our schools, tackle crime and address the cost of living crisis. Over a decade of national renewal, this Labour Government will serve the British public, wherever they live. The Prime Minister has been clear that this Government's priority is to grow our economy. We will boost rural economies with our new deal for farmers; seek a veterinary agreement with the EU to get food exports moving again after the Tories locked them out; and stop farmers ever again being undercut by dodgy Tory trade deals that sell out Britain's environmental and welfare standards, as they sell out Britain's exporters and food producers. We will set up a new British infrastructure council to steer private investment, including for broadband roll-out, into rural areas neglected by the Tories, and reduce our exposure to volatile global fossil fuel prices, protecting farmers' energy bills against future price shocks.

Kemi Badenoch *rose—*

Steve Reed: I am very sorry, but there are only three minutes left and I need to cover the points that have been raised. [*Interruption.*] They had their time.

We will do that by switching on GB Energy as we make Britain a green energy superpower. We will speed up the building of flood defences to protect rural homes and farms, and rebuild our NHS with 40,000 more appointments every week, 8,500 more mental health professionals—[*Interruption*—]—and a hub in every rural community to tackle loneliness and the mental health crisis. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Christopher Chope): Order. The right hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) has behaved abominably.

Steve Reed: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

And that is not the end of the Tories' failure. We will take back our streets from the criminals, with the first ever cross-Government rural crime strategy and more police patrols in rural towns and villages. We will break down barriers to opportunity in rural communities, so our children can realise their ambitions, wherever they grow up. They are the party of broken dreams; this is the party of aspiration.

Nature underpins all the Government's missions. Without nature, there is no economy, no health, no food and no society. Nature is at crisis point. The Tories left Britain one of the most nature-depleted countries on Earth. A third of our bird and mammal species face extinction. Record levels of sewage are poisoning our rivers, lakes and seas. This catastrophe cannot be reversed overnight, but we have already turned the corner. This week we introduced our water special measures Bill to strengthen regulation and reverse the tide of sewage that is killing our waterways. Water bosses will no longer reward themselves with multimillion-pound bonuses—which the Tories allowed—while they oversee record levels of water pollution. If they refuse to clean up their toxic filth, they will face criminal charges. Last week, water companies signed up to my initial package of reforms, including ringfencing funding for vital infrastructure investment. If that money is not spent as it is intended to be, companies will refund their customers. It will no longer be diverted for bonuses or dividends, as the Tories allowed it to be.

The Tories had 14 years to take such action, but they failed absolutely. It took this Government less than one week. That is what change looks like with Labour. This Government are committed to the legally binding environmental targets set under the Environment Act 2021—targets that the Tories missed, but that this Government will meet by working in a new partnership with the nature non-governmental organisations.

I thank all Members who have taken part in this constructive and insightful debate for their perceptive contributions and their dedication to making progress on important matters. After 14 years of chaos, there is once again hope for our environment, hope for our countryside, and hope for our rural communities. I welcome the King's Speech, and I commend it to this House. Change has come after 14 years of chaos and failure.

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Monday 22 July.

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Anna Turley.*)

2.30 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statement

Friday 19 July 2024

EDUCATION

Schools and Teaching

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson):

I am today announcing the launch of an independent expert-led curriculum and assessment review. The review will consider the existing national curriculum and statutory assessment system, and pathways for learners in 16-to-19 education, to drive high and rising standards for every young person. The review will be chaired by Professor Becky Francis CBE, an expert in education policy, including curriculum and education inequality.

The review will contribute to the Government's missions to break down the barriers to opportunity for every child and young person at every stage, and to kick-start economic growth.

The review will build on the Government's commitment to high standards in the curriculum in England, while ensuring greater attention to breadth and flexibility and that no child or young person is left behind. The review will seek to address the key problems and hard barriers to achievement in the curriculum and assessment system from key stage 1 to key stage 5.

Specifically, the review will seek to deliver:

- An excellent foundation in core subjects of reading, writing and maths.

- A broader curriculum, so that children and young people do not miss out on subjects such as music, art, sport and drama, as well as vocational subjects.

- A curriculum that ensures children and young people leave compulsory education ready for life and ready for work, building the knowledge, skills and attributes young people need to thrive. This includes embedding digital, oracy and life skills in their learning.

- A curriculum that reflects the issues and diversities of our society, ensuring all children and young people are represented.

An assessment system that captures the strengths of every child and young person and the breadth of the curriculum, with the right balance of assessment methods, while maintaining the important role of examinations.

The review will be rigorously evidence-driven and will look closely at the barriers which hold children and young people back, particularly those who are from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, have a special educational need or disability and/or are otherwise vulnerable.

The review will seek evolution not revolution, build on the existing relative strengths of a system with finite resources, and not add unnecessary burdens by seeking to fix things that are not broken.

The review will build on the hard work of teachers and staff across the system, and will be undertaken in close consultation with education professionals and other experts; parents; children and young people; and stakeholders such as employers, colleges, universities and trade unions.

The review will start this autumn with a call for evidence. The call for evidence will set out the areas where the review group would particularly welcome evidence and input from the sector and stakeholders, and will direct the focus of the engagement with the sector over the autumn term. The review group will publish an interim report in the new year setting out its interim findings and confirming the key areas for further work. We plan to publish the final review with recommendations in autumn 2025.

Alongside the review, the Department for Education will make legislative changes so that all state schools, including academies, will be required to teach the national curriculum. This will support the Government's ambition for every child to receive a rich and broad curriculum taught by excellent teachers, wherever they are in the country, to set them up with the knowledge and skills to thrive in the future.

The review marks the Government's first step towards an education system where background is no barrier and every young person leaves school or college with the best life chances.

[HCWS13]

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Friday 19 July 2024

EDUCATION	<i>Col. No.</i> 15WS
Schools and Teaching.....	15WS

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CONTENTS

Friday 19 July 2024

Covid-19 Inquiry [Col. 285]

Statement—(Pat McFadden)

Israel and Gaza [Col. 300]

Statement—(Mr David Lammy)

Debate on the Address (Third day) [Col. 313]

Debate adjourned

Written Statement [Col. 15WS]
