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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
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HOUSE OF LORDS

OFFICIAL REPORT

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

Abbreviation	Party/Group
CB	Cross Bench
Con	Conservative
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
GP	Green Party
Ind Lab	Independent Labour
Ind SD	Independent Social Democrat
Ind UU	Independent Ulster Unionist
Lab	Labour
Lab Co-op	Labour and Co-operative Party
LD	Liberal Democrat
Non-afl	Non-affiliated
PC	Plaid Cymru
UUP	Ulster Unionist Party

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House of Lords

Tuesday 3 September 2024

2.30 pm

Prayers—read by the Lord Bishop of Southwark.

Introduction: Baroness Pidgeon

2.37 pm

Caroline Valerie Pidgeon, MBE, having been created Baroness Pidgeon, of Newington in the London Borough of Southwark, was introduced and made the solemn affirmation, supported by Baroness Doocey and Baroness Kramer, and signed an undertaking to abide by the Code of Conduct.

Introduction: Baroness Keeley

2.43 pm

Barbara Mary Keeley, having been created Baroness Keeley, of Worsley in the City of Salford, was introduced and took the oath, supported by Baroness Hayter of Kentish Town and Baroness Blake of Leeds, and signed an undertaking to abide by the Code of Conduct.

Oaths and Affirmations

2.47 pm

Several noble Lords took the oath or made the solemn affirmation, and signed an undertaking to abide by the Code of Conduct.

European Social Charter Question

2.50 pm

Asked by Lord Hendy

To ask His Majesty's Government whether they plan to ratify the Additional Protocol to the European Social Charter to establish a system of collective complaints; and what plans they have to ratify the Revised European Social Charter 1996.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Baroness Sherlock) (Lab): My Lords, the Prime Minister made our commitment to the Council of Europe clear at the Blenheim summit in July. The UK ratified the European Social Charter in 1962 and signed the revised Social Charter in 1997. It is important that the UK is compliant with any new obligations before ratifying a treaty. It is therefore right to consider whether domestic law and practice, including government reforms, are compatible with the revised charter and additional protocol.

Lord Hendy (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for her Answer. The fact that the 1996 charter was signed in 1997 by the United Kingdom does not resolve the issue that the United Kingdom has not ratified the 1996 charter. Since 2014, the Council of Europe has been trying to reinvigorate the European Social Charter process through the Council of Ministers meeting that she mentioned and the high-level conference on the European Social Charter in July. I wonder whether she will agree that it is vital that the United Kingdom not only supports, but is seen to support and lead, efforts to reinvigorate the European Social Charter.

Baroness Sherlock (Lab): My Lords, in signing a charter, the UK is indicating that it agrees with the contents as negotiated, but we can ratify it only when we know that we will be compliant with it, because to ratify a charter is to agree to be bound by its provisions. As I have indicated before, that would mean that the UK would need to make an assessment to be sure that it would in fact be compliant with the terms of the treaty before doing it. My noble friend will know that we have plans, including the employment rights Bill, which will change our position on some provisions in the revised charter, so we will certainly consider whether we can ratify the revised charter in the light of the Government's reforms. On the collective complaints system, the UK has for some time held that it is among the majority of member states party to the European Social Charter who have not accepted that because we believe that the existing supervisory mechanisms are adequate.

Baroness Blower (Lab): My Lords, Article 6.4 of the charter protects the right to strike. Under previous Governments, the UK built up an unenviable record of being in breach of its conformity every time that it was reviewed since 1984. Will the Government now take the opportunity of the forthcoming employment rights Bill to ensure that we are in conformity with the right to strike?

Baroness Sherlock (Lab): My Lords, the Government have plans for reforming the whole landscape of employment. We value the important role that unions play in shaping employment rights, domestically and internationally, and we want to create a new partnership between businesses, trade unions and working people. That will include taking steps to strengthen the rights of UK workers and their representatives, such as repealing prohibitive restrictions. We will repeal the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act to remove barriers to effective collective action and strengthen rights. It is right that the Government do the things that we consider right for this country, but we will in due course look at whether the changes we have made put us in a position to consider ratifying the revised Social Charter and make a judgment at that point as to whether that is the right thing for Britain to do.

Lord Wigley (PC): My Lords, is it the intention of the Government—is it their aspiration—that they will be in a position to sign?

Baroness Sherlock (Lab): My Lords, in a sense we have indicated our support for the contents of the revised charter by signing it. Deciding to ratify it is a decision to be bound by its provisions, so it makes sense to be able even to consider ratification only at the point at which the Government have been able to do an assessment and conclude that domestic law and practice will be compliant with it.

Lord Palmer of Childs Hill (LD): My Lords, as I understand the Minister's reply, the Government want to ratify the treaty only when and if there are adequate resources. On the basis of adequate resources, can she say what steps her department has taken to maximise the take up of pension credit by all those entitled to it?

Baroness Sherlock (Lab): Nice try. Just to clarify, I should say that I was not talking about resources in terms of ratification. To ratify a treaty is to agree to be bound by its provisions. If UK domestic law and practice will not meet those provisions, the UK cannot ratify a treaty only to find that it would be instantly in breach of it. That is what this is about; it is not about resources. However, on the question of pension credit, we are in the middle of a week of action in which the Department for Work and Pensions is working with local authorities and other partners to encourage pensioners across the country to apply for pension credit. We are developing new plans to go further through the winter. We want everybody who is entitled to it to get pension credit, and will be out there working to make sure that they do.

Viscount Younger of Leckie (Con): The noble Baroness mentioned the employment rights Bill. Many businesses are already facing uncertainty given these government plans to introduce French-style employment laws. The additional protocol of the European Social Charter is supposed to be a human rights protection system for social and economic rights, organised on a collective basis, providing a fast and effective procedure to support the charter. Will she agree that it is actually slow, very bureaucratic, expensive and acts as a chilling factor for businesses, which are struggling to raise their productivity?

Baroness Sherlock (Lab): My Lords, if the noble Viscount is talking about the additional protocol, I should say that the UK is one of a majority of about two-thirds of states which are party to the European Social Charter that have not adopted the additional protocol. I expect he will know that, having done my job until about 20 minutes ago. It is not because we have any objection to engaging with social partners, but because we regard the current system, in which reports are made by national Governments indicating their compliance with the provisions of the charter, to be adequate.

Lord Balfe (Con): My Lords, will the Minister commit the Government to work towards ratifying? It really is time to get this ratified. We must recognise that a prosperous society is based on working between trade unions and employers.

Baroness Sherlock (Lab): I absolutely agree with the noble Lord. We regard a prosperous society as one in which a good partnership is built between businesses, Government, employers and workers. That is the way to develop our country's success and shared prosperity. I understand that any country that signs a treaty agrees that it must work towards ratification. However, it has been impossible for the UK to do that when domestic law and practice have been so clearly in breach of the provisions.

NHS: Breast Screening Programme

Question

2.58 pm

Asked by Baroness Morgan of Drefelin

To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the take-up of the NHS breast screening programme.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Baroness Merron) (Lab): Breast cancer survival rates have improved by 41% since the mid-1970s and 86% of women survive their cancer beyond five years. I pay tribute to NHS staff and to my noble friend Lady Morgan for making such a contribution to these improvements. Take-up of breast screening is just below 70%, and NHS England has developed a national uptake improvement plan, including expanding access to screening, reducing inequalities, improving IT systems and ensuring that communications are inclusive and accessible to all.

Baroness Morgan of Drefelin (Lab): I thank my noble friend for that very kind and generous Answer. As we know, screening uptake has been in decline for more than 10 years now. There is no NHS region that has met its 70% minimum standards since 2019-20. Importantly, uptake for women on their first invite is really worrying. Will the Minister commit to keep feet to the fire on this issue, and work closely with the department and NHS England to press down on any potential complacency because breast cancer outcomes have improved so much? Screening is a simple way to stop women dying of breast cancer, and it is not rocket science. Please can we do all we can to improve uptake?

Baroness Merron (Lab): My noble friend makes a very clear and definite point about the link between breast screening and outcomes. I certainly can give her the assurance that we will continue to seek to drive up rates of breast cancer screening. It is important to say that the reason for the take-up not improving as one might have hoped since Covid is multifactored and complex, as I am sure she understands. We all know that research shows that women are more likely to attend breast screening if it is in a unit that is easy to get to, if it is convenient, and if we can help women to get over the problems of fear of the test, awkwardness or embarrassment. I give my noble friend the assurance that the NHS is working on understanding all that, and all that will be in collaboration with charities and key stakeholders.

Baroness Bloomfield of Hinton Waldrist (Con): I also begin by paying tribute to the noble Baroness, Lady Morgan, for her excellent work with Breakthrough Breast Cancer and more recently with Breast Cancer Now. Can the Minister reassure me that the Government will look again at the ceasing of breast cancer screening after the age of 70, when the incidence of disease occurring in that age group is still high, and would be higher were it not for the success of earlier breast cancer screening? This cohort of women should not be ignored.

Baroness Merron (Lab): If a woman in the age group to which the noble Baroness refers has concerns, she may request follow-up and investigation. But it is the case that we follow the scientific advice, which is that going beyond that age as a matter of course will not give the rewards that we would hope. I can certainly reassure any woman in that age group that she will be seen should she have concerns, and she should present herself as soon as possible.

Baroness Walmsley (LD): My Lords, artificial intelligence has been very efficient in helping to interpret breast imaging, reducing false positives and false negatives, and significantly reducing the workload of the second reader. We know that early detection is key to reducing mortality, and I understand that AI can be used to identify patients with high risk so that they can be screened more frequently and proactively. What work is being done to use AI to identify high-risk individuals, so they can be screened more frequently?

Baroness Merron (Lab): It is important to ensure that the service is there for those who are at greater risk. The noble Baroness is right to refer to the growing interest in and potential use of AI, which is indeed very exciting. The National Screening Committee is very aware of this point. The committee is working with the National Institute for Health and Care Research and NHS England, and has designed a research project to see whether AI can be safely used to read mammograms in the breast screening programme, and whether that is acceptable both to women and to clinicians. That work will continue.

Lord Patel (CB): My Lords, I join others in commending the work that Breast Cancer Now has done in improving outcomes for women through breast screening and improving breast cancer outcomes. However, the problem remains when it comes to wider issues about care of patients with cancers. We know that early diagnosis achieves the best results for all cancers, yet we are woefully low in the percentage of people who are picked up with early cancers. There is another more serious issue, which is unwarranted variations in the care of all cancer patients. Unwarranted variation is when care that is clearly demonstrated to be effective in reducing death rates is not given to cancer patients. That has to be absolutely unacceptable. Eliminating unwarranted variation in cancer care ought to be one of the performance measures that integrated care boards are measured on—I hope that the noble Lord, Lord Darzi, is listening.

Baroness Merron (Lab): I am sure that the noble Lord, Lord Darzi, is listening, but if he is not I will ensure that the noble Lord's comments are drawn to his attention. I can say to your Lordships' House that this Government intend to transform the NHS from a late-diagnosis, late-treatment health service to one that catches illness earlier and also prevents it in the first place. It is that shift that will make the greatest change. I have been interested to see that, across all the screening programmes, something like 15 million people are invited for screening and 10 million take it up. That still leaves us with 5 million people to work on. It is important to note that the 10 million take-up figure for screening saves a considerable number of lives. We need to continue to drive up the take-up on screening, across the various cancers and not just breast cancer. As noble Lords will know, there are programmes in respect of cervical and bowel cancer, and there will be a lung cancer screening programme as well.

Lord Evans of Rainow (Con): My Lords, I begin by paying tribute to the noble Baroness, Lady Morgan, for her excellent work with Breakthrough Breast Cancer and more recently with Breast Cancer Now. We are very lucky to have her in your Lordships' House. We know that the NHS wants to shift the emphasis from cure to prevention and screening, which, whether for breast cancer or other conditions, is a vital part of prevention. The previous Conservative Government took action to drive up breast cancer screening, with new breast cancer screening units and our community diagnostic centre programme. What steps will the Government take to further increase the uptake of breast cancer screening?

Baroness Merron (Lab): The measures that the noble Lord refers to did indeed assist, but as I mentioned earlier we have a stubborn problem in returning to pre-Covid rates. The improvement plan that exists sets out the priorities and the interventions, but also the monitoring of what is working and what is not. The kinds of things that are being tested and introduced now include, for example, new IT systems to enable communication with women in 30 different languages, and new IT systems that mean people know when their appointment is and are reminded of it. All these things sound quite straightforward, but they have not been in place across the country and it is important that they are. I mentioned the importance of addressing fears and embarrassment, improving information and reassurance to women, as well as more convenient times and booking systems. It is very important that we make better use of mobile screening units, so that screening is near to where women are.

Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick (Lab): My Lords, undoubtedly breast screening is vital—I know that from a personal perspective—but I ask my noble friend whether consideration could be given to lowering the breast cancer screening age to 40, to include for diagnosis those with triple-negative breast cancer, because many in the younger cohort are diagnosed with it.

Baroness Merron (Lab): As my noble friend will be aware, we keep a very close eye on the science and the advice, and we will continue to follow that. I emphasise,

[BARONESS MERRON]

and it was raised in an earlier question as well, that the NHS has been proactively writing to those women at very high risk of breast cancer who may not have been referred. I give an assurance that women who are at greater risk are not forgotten.

Bangladesh: Aid and Development Question

3.09 pm

Asked by **Lord Harries of Pentregarth**

To ask His Majesty's Government, following the statement of the Permanent Representative to the United Nations on 13 November 2023 during Bangladesh's Universal Periodic Review at the Human Rights Council, how they plan to ensure that their aid and development funds are directed to marginal groups in that country, including Dalit women and children.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Baroness Chapman of Darlington) (Lab): My Lords, the United Kingdom uses development funding in Bangladesh to provide targeted support for marginalised groups, including religious and ethnic minorities such as the Dalit community. Since 2017 we have supported 23,000 Dalit men and women with income opportunities and health and social protection services. We are currently working with communities and marginalised groups to raise awareness and provide leadership training as part of our peace facilitator group volunteer network through our Bangladesh-Collaborative, Accountable and Peaceful Politics programme.

Lord Harries of Pentregarth (CB): I thank the Minister for her reply. There are between 3.5 million and 6.5 million Dalits in Bangladesh. By every possible indicator, they are marginalised—in poverty, access to education, health and so on. Women are particularly vulnerable because they suffer three forms of discrimination: on grounds of caste, gender and economic status. One reason why it is difficult to get help to them at the moment is the lack of disaggregated data on the Dalit community. Will she encourage the Bangladesh community to collect and publish disaggregated data on the Dalit community? Only then will UK aid and other forms of help be able to get to the most marginalised.

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): I thank the noble and right reverend Lord for his question, which raises a very interesting point. He will be aware that the Government in Bangladesh are going through significant upheaval at the moment, if I can put it that way, but we are supporting the interim Government and will engage with the new Government, as he suggests.

Baroness Verma (Con): My Lords, I wrote to the Prime Minister after Sheikh Hasina fled the country, having been removed by the protests. I have not received a response from him on the plight of Hindu and

minority communities whose businesses and homes are being burned down by extreme elements in Bangladesh. If we are to give aid to Bangladesh, it must be with the protection of all.

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): I am grateful for the noble Baroness's question and will convey her desire for a response to the Prime Minister. The UK remains deeply concerned by the violence that we have seen in Bangladesh and by reports of attacks against religious minority groups. The Foreign Secretary made clear that all sides now need to work together to end this violence, restore calm, de-escalate the situation and prevent any further loss of life.

Baroness Nye (Lab): My Lords, the Minister will know that the Rohingya, one of the most marginalised groups in the world, received much-needed sanctuary from the Bangladeshi Government after the ethnic cleansing by the military in Burma. They are living in terrible conditions in Cox's Bazar. In light of the continuing and escalating conflict in Myanmar, especially in Rakhine state, and the new influx of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh, are the Government reviewing the cuts in British aid undertaken by the previous Government for the Rohingya and the surrounding Bangladeshi communities in Cox's Bazar?

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): We will continue to support Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar and elsewhere in Bangladesh. The UK is a leading donor to the Rohingya response. Since 2017 we have provided more than £391 million for the Rohingya and host communities in Bangladesh, and nearly £30 million for the Rohingya and other Muslim minorities in Rakhine state. UK advocacy has helped to improve Rohingya lives in Bangladesh's camps, including through the establishment of the Myanmar education curriculum for children and frameworks allowing skills training for adults. I assure the noble Baroness that we will continue to stress the importance of providing education and livelihood opportunities for the Rohingya refugees to their well-being. Education and skills training are fundamental to the refugees being able to lead safe, fulfilling and meaningful lives.

Lord Purvis of Tweed (LD): My Lords, I declare my interest in the register. Does the Minister agree that in the peaceful protests, young women in particular were at the forefront of asserting their democratic rights? The UK has a long-standing and good relationship with civil society in Bangladesh, and is now celebrating 50 years of Voluntary Service Overseas being present in Bangladesh. When the Minister and the Government make decisions imminently about the future of the global volunteering programme, will minority communities and the majority community of women—young women in particular—be at the forefront of UK support for civil society in Bangladesh?

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): The noble Lord makes a very good point. A few noble Lords have now mentioned women and girls, and it is absolutely right that we continue to keep women in Bangladesh

at the front of our minds. Women and girls are an important part of our development agenda; Bangladesh signed the joint statement on sexual and reproductive health and rights to mark the 30th anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development. We will continue to support women and girls in Bangladesh, especially with their education.

Baroness Sugg (Con): My Lords, I hope the Minister will agree that education is absolutely key to making the progress that we want to see in Bangladesh and around the world. I was appointed as the first Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Girls' Education and was ably succeeded by Helen Grant MP. When we were in post, we both visited Bangladesh to discuss how best to reach the most marginalised girls and girls' education. Can the Minister confirm that this Government will continue to support girls' education and say whether there are any plans to appoint a new Special Envoy for Girls' Education?

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): As the noble Baroness would wish me to, I can absolutely confirm that we will continue to support the work she describes. On the issue of the appointment of an envoy, I do not believe that a decision has been made but I note her strong support for that position. I also note the success and vigour with which she fulfilled that role herself.

The Lord Bishop of Southwark: My Lords, the Minister will be aware that, notwithstanding the change in government in Dhaka and the protections that the laws and constitution of Bangladesh afford all its citizens, Bangladeshi women still face gender-based discrimination, and Dalit women and girls are particularly vulnerable to untouchability practices and violence. Will the Minister assure the House that UK aid in this area will now be shaped by consultations with representatives of Dalit women and girls, who rarely have access to decision-making in the society in which they live?

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): I am very grateful for that question, which again highlights the priority that noble Lords wish to see given to women and girls. On the issue of aid, the UK aid programme in Bangladesh is largely focused on humanitarian support to the Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar. It works predominantly through the UN agencies, and we have provided £391 million since the current crisis began in 2017.

Lord Alton of Liverpool (CB): My Lords, returning the Minister to the question about Rohingya refugees asked by her noble friend, the noble Baroness, Lady Nye, will the Minister confirm that there are now more than 1 million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and that Cox's Bazar is the biggest and densest refugee camp in the world, adding to the 120 million other displaced people in the world? When did her department last carry out a joint analysis of conflict and stability—a JACS report—about the plight of the Rohingya? Will she ensure that if it has not done so, it will?

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): I will take that as a note of encouragement from the noble Lord. The long-term solution for these refugees is of course a voluntary, safe and dignified return to Rakhine state. With the recent upsurge in violence in Myanmar, it is clear that these conditions are not currently met, and we continue to keep a very close watch on the situation.

Lord Browne of Ladyton (Lab): My Lords, while welcoming the Question from the noble and right reverend Lord, Lord Harries of Pentregarth, and my noble friend's reassurances, I am conscious that since the statement to which the Question refers was made, Bangladesh has experienced almost complete political upheaval and devastating flooding. These floods have displaced communities, caused loss of life and destroyed critical national infrastructure. Given these challenges, what assessment have the Government made of the resilience of the in-country political and logistics structures upon which any delivery of aid will depend?

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): That is a very good question. The furthest I can go at the moment is just to say that the UK and international partners welcome the appointment of the interim Government. We are engaging with them proactively, including to understand the extent of their remit and plans for the next, I believe, 18 months to two years. The priorities that the noble Lord outlined will be the topic of the conversations we have with the Government.

Smoking: Public Places *Question*

3.19 pm

Asked by Lord Foulkes of Cumnock

To ask His Majesty's Government what plans they have, and on what timescale, to introduce legislation to extend the ban on smoking in public places; and what additional measures such legislation will contain.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Baroness Merron) (Lab): My Lords, the Government are soon to introduce the tobacco and vapes Bill, which stands to be the most significant public health intervention in a generation and will put us on track to become a smoke-free UK. The Prime Minister fully supports measures that will create a smoke-free environment, helping to reduce 80,000 preventable deaths, reduce the burden on the NHS and reduce the burden on the taxpayer. We will set out more details very soon.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock (Lab Co-op): I am really grateful to the Minister, but can she give a clear indication as to when the legislation will be introduced, to start to reduce these premature deaths? There is overwhelming public support for a smoking ban in children's parks, in beer gardens, on beaches and in front of hospitals. I have seen people coming out of hospitals and lighting up, when their lungs and heart

[LORD FOULKES OF CUMNOCK]
are affected by that smoking. We need action as quickly as possible. I exceptionally thank the Conservatives for setting this in motion when they were in government.

Noble Lords: Oh!

Baroness Merron (Lab): I am sure that the whole House has noted and welcomes the last point made by my noble friend. He has been a doughty campaigner in this area over many decades, and I thank him for that. As I will reiterate, more details and the introduction of the Bill will come very soon—I will not say “in the summer” or “in due course” but only “soon”. My noble friend is right to make his observations about outdoor places, details of which will be forthcoming. On the public’s attitude, what he said certainly is the case. It is interesting that polling published just last week shows that almost six in 10 adults would support banning smoking in pub gardens and outdoor restaurants. The truth is that public opinion has shifted over the decades. It is important to work with that, as well as to bear in mind that there is no good impact of smoking, including passive smoking, which is why the Prime Minister has indicated his support for the direction of travel. More details will follow.

Lord Geddes (Con): My Lords—

Baroness Northover (LD): My Lords—

Lord Hayward (Con): My Lords—

Lord Kennedy of Southwark (Lab Co-op): My Lords, there is plenty of time. Let the noble Lord, Lord Geddes, speak first, but everyone can get in.

Lord Geddes (Con): My Lords, I thank the Government Chief Whip most sincerely. I declare an interest as a member of the pipe and cigar smokers’ club, although I indulge in neither. When His Majesty’s Government come out with the details, will they make a full assessment of the effect of such a ban on the hospitality industry? It will have significant effects on employment, let alone the enjoyment of those who indulge. Does the Minister not agree that this is a case of the nanny state multiplied by an indefinite number?

Baroness Merron (Lab): On the last point, I do not agree with the noble Lord that this is the nanny state gone to a new level. It is about protecting people’s health, and in this Question, we are talking about passive smoking in particular, where people do not have choices in certain areas. On the point about hospitability, it is important to note that, after implementing the indoor smoking ban in 2007, 40% of businesses reported a positive impact on their company. Let us not forget that Office for National Statistics data showed that 69% of respondents visited pubs about the same as before, and, interestingly, 17% visited them more. However, I assure the noble Lord that we will work with the hospitality sector should this be a direction that we specifically take. As always, there will be an impact assessment, close working across government and consultation with relevant stakeholders, as there always is when we look at new legislation.

Baroness Northover (LD): My Lords, I urge the Government—it sounds like the door is open—to resist the siren voices which so often have accompanied efforts to protect the public from tobacco smoke, including the theoretical risk to pubs, as we have just heard. It is a joy to be in public places which are now smoke-free. Does the Minister agree that, now that restaurants and pubs have pavement licences, those areas too should, like the interiors, be smoke-free?

Baroness Merron (Lab): I am glad that the noble Baroness welcomes the direction of travel. As regards the specifics that she seeks, those will be forthcoming in the very near future. However, it is important to remind ourselves that the tobacco industry, for example, was very vociferous in its opposition to indoor smoke-free legislation and argued that it would be disastrous for hospitality, but, as I mentioned, it had almost no impact, and in some sectors it had a positive impact. As my noble friend said earlier, the response of the public, the way they approach this matter and their understanding are also crucial.

Lord Patel (CB): My Lords, the noble Lord, Lord Geddes, tempted me to get up. In wishing him a happy birthday, I suggest that his longevity might not be related to his cigar and cigarette smoking. The statistics are quite clear: smoking causes immense harm to those who indulge in it, with not only 10,000 lung cancers a year but tens of thousands of chronic lung diseases. It is right that we have a policy that eliminates cigarette smoking altogether.

Baroness Merron (Lab): I am glad that the noble Lord welcomes the Bill, and I hope that he will bring his expertise and support when it is before the House. This will be a matter of great debate but also one of consultation.

Lord Sikka (Lab): My Lords, if I set up a market stall with products guaranteed to disable, maim or kill the consumer, I would not be allowed to sell, irrespective of any economic gains. I would probably be arrested and forced to bear the cost of restitution. Can the Minister explain why tobacco companies are allowed to do the same and do not bear the full cost of restitution?

Baroness Merron (Lab): I am sure my noble friend will be pleased to know that the tobacco and vapes Bill will not just introduce a progressive smoking ban, which I know the previous Government wished to do, but will stop vapes and other consumer nicotine products such as nicotine pouches being deliberately branded and advertised to appeal to children. Together—this is important—the measures will stop the next generation becoming hooked on nicotine, and this will be the furthest step that we have taken so far. However, the focus of the Bill is on what is legal to do, and that is one of the many reasons that I refute the accusation of this being the action of some kind of nanny state. It is not. It is about giving people the environment and the support that they need to protect their own health and create a healthy environment.

Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay (Con): My Lords, the Prime Minister promised us a Government who would “tread more lightly” on our lives, but in this area, they seem to have marched ahead in a rather heavy and flat-footed manner. Many businesses in our hospitality industry, and indeed in our cultural sector, such as live music venues, are still recovering from the pandemic and its aftermath. During that pandemic and indeed in the light of the 2007 ban, many of them invested, in good faith, considerable sums in adapting their premises to be suitable. As the noble Lord, Lord Foulkes, knows, when the last reforming Government acted, they did so on the basis of evidence. The Minister says that there will be an impact assessment and a consultation. Why was that not done before these plans were briefed to the press, and when will it be conducted?

Baroness Merron (Lab): I can tell the noble Lord that it was not briefed to the press. It gives me the opportunity to tell your Lordships’ House that it was a leak and, as the noble Lord will remember, it is not usual for Ministers to comment on leaks. I suggest that what we are doing here is acting on evidence. Passive smoking has a negative impact on people’s lives—both the quality of their health and their longevity. We have a responsibility in this Parliament and this Government to look at measures to improve that. I hope that the noble Lord will recall that it was his Government who started this Bill, and we welcomed it.

Environmental Targets (Public Authorities) Bill [HL] First Reading

3.32 pm

A Bill to make provision for a statutory objective requiring public bodies to contribute to delivery of targets set under the Environment Act 2021 and Climate Change Act 2008; to place a duty on public bodies to meet this objective in the exercise of their functions; and for connected purposes.

The Bill was introduced by Lord Krebs, read a first time and ordered to be printed.

Complications from Abortions (Annual Report) Bill [HL] First Reading

3.32 pm

A Bill to require the Secretary of State to publish an annual report on complications from abortions in England; and for connected purposes.

The Bill was introduced by Lord Moylan, read a first time and ordered to be printed.

Ukraine

Commons Urgent Question

3.33 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Baroness Chapman of Darlington) (Lab): My Lords, the Answer is as follows:

“I am grateful to the right honourable Member for asking his Urgent Question on a matter that is so critical. As the House is well aware, Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine poses a significant threat to Euro-Atlantic security and has struck at the heart of the international rules-based system on which our security and prosperity depend.

UK support for Ukraine in defending itself against Russian aggression is ironclad. Ukraine’s incursion into the Russian oblast of Kursk has proven once again what Ukraine is capable of, but its armed forces remain under considerable pressure on the front line, particularly in Donbass, and Russia continues to bombard Ukrainian cities and civilian infrastructure with missiles and drones. The UK will continue to do everything we can to step up and accelerate our support, to keep the pressure up on Putin’s war machine and to hold to account those responsible for Russia’s illegal actions.

On the day that the new Government were appointed, the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary spoke to their Ukrainian counterparts to underline our support. Within 48 hours, the Defence Secretary travelled to Odesa, where he announced a new package of military equipment and pledged to accelerate the delivery of previously announced military aid.

During the NATO Washington summit, the Prime Minister committed to providing £3 billion a year of military support for Ukraine until 2030-31, or for as long as is needed. Allies also agreed a significant package of support and agreed that Ukraine’s pathway to NATO membership was irreversible.

On 18 July, the Prime Minister hosted President Zelensky and European political community leaders at Blenheim, where 44 European countries and the EU signed a call to action to tackle Russia’s shadow fleet, which is enabling Russia to evade international sanctions. The Prime Minister and President Zelensky also agreed a new defence industrial support treaty that enables Ukraine to draw on £3.5 billion of UK export finance. I am sure that the House will want to be aware that yesterday the UK-Ukraine digital trade agreement entered into force, making digital trade between our two countries cheaper and easier, boosting both economies.

In summary, Ukraine remains high on the agenda, including in our discussions with our international partners. The Prime Minister discussed Ukraine with Chancellor Scholz and President Macron last week, and the Defence Secretary will attend a meeting of the international Ukraine defence contact group on 5 September. We remain in close discussion with Ukraine on the support that it needs to prevail”.

Lord Callanan (Con): My Lords, I first thank the Minister very much indeed for the government response, which we on this side warmly welcome. We learned only hours ago of yet another appalling Russian missile attack, on innocent civilians in Poltava, Ukraine. The last time I looked, the news was that it had killed at least 40 people and injured almost 200. Sadly, we seem to hear about new, dreadful attacks almost daily and there seems to be no limit to the barbarity inflicted by Putin and the Russian war machine on the civilian population of Ukraine. Russia has also continued its missile and drone attacks against Ukrainian energy

[LORD CALLANAN]

infrastructure in recent weeks in an attempt yet again to freeze the brave nation into submission this coming winter. I was delighted to see the new Defence Secretary visit Odesa within 48 hours of the new Government being formed, as the Minister said. That was a vital signal that UK support will continue to be steadfast, despite the change of Government.

Will the Minister provide the House with some further details to update us on how efforts to tackle Russia's shadow fleet, which it uses to evade sanctions, are going? I know that a lot of international discussions are going on. Also, I hope that the Government are continuing discussions with our European and American allies on permitting Ukraine to use Storm Shadow missiles to hit targets inside Russia, although I understand that the Minister will probably be unable to comment on that.

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): My Lords, I first welcome the noble Lord to his place. I have not had an opportunity to do so since the election. We had many exchanges in the last Parliament, all of which were very good-natured.

The noble Lord asked about sanctions. The UK has sanctioned over 2,000 individuals and entities, 1,700 of which have been sanctioned since Russia's full-scale invasion—the most wide-ranging sanctions ever imposed on a major economy. UK, US and EU sanctions have deprived Russia of over \$400 million since February 2022, equivalent to four more years of funding for the invasion. According to its own Ministry of Finance, Russian revenues from oil and gas dropped by 24% in 2023.

I also welcome the tone of the noble Lord's contribution. It is vital that we maintain cross-party, steadfast support for Ukraine and that there is no change in that as we go forward. So I welcome his words and the tone in which he said them.

Lord Purvis of Tweed (LD): My Lords, I welcome the noble Lord to his new portfolio on the Opposition Front Bench. Can the Minister confirm that secondary sanctions are an option that can be considered with regard to those countries that are facilitating the shadow fleet?

My principal question relates to the irresponsible nature of the Russian regime on the nuclear installations in Ukraine. Is it the Government's assessment that the attacks on 26 August constitute a nuclear terror incident? Are the Government now willing to work with the European Union Commission on the preparations of sanctions against the Russian state nuclear monopoly Rosatom? Are we able, with our partners, to offer Ukraine air surveillance support to ensure that there is potentially wider protection of these nuclear installations that are vulnerable?

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): The noble Lord will know that we cannot comment on operational matters, but I note his question and what lies behind it. He asked about the shadow fleet. The UK has so far sanctioned 15 ships of the Russian shadow fleet, which is enabling Russia to evade international sanctions.

In the margins of the European Political Community summit, 44 countries and the EU signed our call to action to tackle this issue.

Lord Stirrup (CB): My Lords, whatever the outcome of the conflict in Ukraine, it is clear that, in the longer term, we will face a hostile and aggressive Russia with expansionist ambitions that go well beyond Ukraine, and which is clearly more than willing to use force in pursuit of its objectives. In light of this, is not the recent trailing of potential cuts to the UK's defence capabilities because of budgetary pressures irresponsible, irrational and extraordinarily dangerous?

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): My Lords, noble Lords will be aware that we have made our commitment to 2.5%. A review of all departmental spending is happening and we all know the reasons for that, but our commitment to the support of Ukraine is steadfast and non-negotiable. We have committed £3 billion annually until 2030-31.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Con): My Lords, I first congratulate the noble Baroness and the Government on sustaining this strength. I also congratulate my noble friend on his portfolio. I assure the noble Baroness that this side of the House, together with all sides, as I found during my tenure, will stay strong and consistent and consolidated in our support for the Government's position, which we welcome.

My focus is on two specific questions. One is on the progress made on preventing sexual violence in conflict, which we were working on with the first lady of Ukraine, Olena Zelenska. The other is on the worrying and continuing situation of close to 20,000 Ukrainian children who were abducted and taken to Russia. Qatar played an important role just before the summer break in returning some of them and I would welcome an update.

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): The issue of the Ukrainian children who were abducted is one of the most heart-rending situations imaginable and I thank the noble Lord for raising it. There will be further updates going forward but, for today, I will say that the UK has committed £357 million in humanitarian assistance to Ukraine and the region, as well as a further £242 million of bilateral funding for Ukraine announced at the G7 in June of this year to support immediate humanitarian energy and stabilisation needs and to lay the foundations for longer-term economic and social recovery and reconstruction.

I also thank the noble Lord for the work he did in government on this and many other issues. He is well respected across the House and is always very open and easy to deal with.

Lord West of Spithead (Lab): My Lords, first, I completely support everything that the noble and gallant Lord said, but I want to ask a question about secondary sanctions. There is no doubt that, in economic terms, Russia can keep going the way it is because of support from China. Secondary sanctions can have a huge impact on China, which is in a very poor position

in terms of the amount it produces relative to what it consumes. Are we looking closely at these secondary sanctions, as they apply to China, to try to have some effect on that financial flow?

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): As the noble Lord can imagine, our sanctions team has never been busier. We have sanctioned over 2,000 individuals. For very good reason, we are determined to tackle illegal money laundering and kleptocracy across the world wherever we find it and we will take whatever action we need to within the UK's legal framework.

Lord Robathan (Con): My Lords, does the Minister not agree that we should not accept the red lines laid down by the aggressor, Putin? His red line is apparently NATO weapons being used against Russia. Hold on; he is the aggressor. Should not we, the US and others say that Storm Shadow missiles would be of great value to the Ukrainians in fighting and winning this war? We should press the US to allow us to give them to them.

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): My Lords, we could not be clearer in our support for Ukraine. We provide a huge amount of support and weaponry to Ukraine, which is consistent with the approach of our key allies. That situation will not change.

Baroness Watkins of Tavistock (CB): My Lords, there are increasingly concerning reports of infections in wounded soldiers that are resistant to antibiotics. Could the Minister assure us that we are working closely with the Ukrainians to ensure that they get appropriate treatment early and that we protect Europe from the spread of such infections? We have no idea how many there are in Russia at the moment.

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): The noble Baroness raises a very important point. Our humanitarian funding is contributing to work in that area and she is absolutely right to remind us just how the conflict in Ukraine can affect us, here in the United Kingdom, in so many different ways.

Middle East Update

Statement

The following Statement was made in the House of Commons on Monday 2 September.

“With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a Statement on the Middle East. On taking office in July, I told the House that this Government's priority in the region will be to advance the cause of peace. That continues to be our mission on every front: in Israel, in the West Bank, in Lebanon, in the Red Sea and, of course, in Gaza, where we need an immediate ceasefire, the protection of civilians, the immediate release of all hostages and more aid getting into Gaza.

Over the summer, we faced the prospect of full-scale war breaking out between Lebanese Hezbollah and Israel. On each of my three visits to the region, including alongside my right honourable friend the Defence

Secretary and, most recently, my joint visit with French Foreign Minister Séjourné, I have urged Lebanese Hezbollah, the Lebanese Government and Israel to engage with the US-led discussions to resolve their disagreements diplomatically and to reach a peaceful resolution through the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701.

As we continue to work with our allies and partners to push for a diplomatic solution, we none the less stand ready for the worst-case scenario, including the potential evacuation of British nationals. Our message to those still in Lebanon remains clear: leave now.

Our common goal of peace in the Middle East will never be lasting until there is safety, security and sovereignty for both Israel and a Palestinian state. We must all keep at the forefront of our mind the pain, the anguish and the horror this conflict has caused for so many ordinary civilians: the victims of the 7 October atrocity; the hostages and all those still enduring unimaginable suffering, whether they are hoping to see their loved ones again or are mourning their loss, as the tragic events of this weekend illustrate, with the recovery of the bodies of six murdered hostages; the Israeli people still living under rocket fire, not only from Hamas but from other hostile actors explicitly dedicated to Israel's annihilation, and fighting an enemy in Hamas whose appalling tactics endanger countless civilian lives; and the innocent Palestinians, with tens of thousands killed in the fighting, their numbers growing by the day, including distressing numbers of women and children. Many mothers are so malnourished that they cannot produce milk for their babies, and families are struggling to keep their children alive. Disease and famine loom ever larger.

Heroic humanitarians are putting their lives on the line to help others, including the brave aid workers I met from the United Nations agencies and at the Palestine Red Crescent Society warehouse I visited alongside France's Foreign Minister last month. Indeed, last Thursday, the UK led a session at the United Nations Security Council encouraging a continued global focus on the protection of civilians in Gaza, including the need for action on polio.

The escalation we are now seeing in the West Bank, as well as in Gaza, is deeply worrying, with many communities facing settler violence amid an ongoing occupation, and so many on either side of this terrible conflict convinced that the world does not grasp the reality of Israel's predicament, or the depth of Palestinian suffering.

Throughout my life, I have been a friend of Israel: a liberal, progressive Zionist who believes in Israel as a democratic state and a homeland for the Jewish people, which has the right both to exist and to defend itself. But I believe also that Israel will exist in safety and security only if there is a two-state solution that guarantees the rights of all Israeli citizens and their Palestinian neighbours, who have their own inalienable right to self-determination and security.

As concern at the horrifying scenes in Gaza has risen, many in this House, as well as esteemed lawyers and international organisations, have raised British arms export licensing to Israel. After raising my own concerns from opposition, on taking office, I immediately

sought to update the review. On my first appearance as Foreign Secretary in this House, I committed to sharing the review's conclusions.

We have rigorously followed every stage of the process established by the previous Conservative Government. Let me first be clear on the review's scope. This Government are not an international court. We have not, and could not, arbitrate on whether or not Israel has breached international humanitarian law. This is a forward-looking evaluation, not a determination of innocence or guilt, and it does not prejudice any future determinations by the competent courts.

However, facing a conflict such as this, it is this Government's legal duty to review export licences. Criterion 2C of the strategic export licensing criteria states that the Government will

'not issue export licences if there is a clear risk that the items might be used to commit or facilitate serious violations of international humanitarian law'.

It is with regret that I inform the House today that the assessment I have received leaves me unable to conclude anything other than that, for certain UK arms exports to Israel, there exists a clear risk that they might be used to commit or facilitate a serious violation of international humanitarian law.

I have informed my right honourable friend the Business and Trade Secretary. Therefore, he is today announcing the suspension of around 30 licences, from a total of approximately 350, to Israel, as required under the Export Control Act 2002. These include licences for equipment that we assess is for use in the current conflict in Gaza, such as important components that go into military aircraft, including fighter aircraft, helicopters and drones, as well as items that facilitate ground targeting. For transparency, the Government are publishing a summary of our assessment.

Today, I want to underline four points about these decisions. First, Israel's actions in Gaza continue to lead to immense loss of civilian life, widespread destruction to civilian infrastructure and immense suffering. In many cases, it has not been possible to reach a determinative conclusion on allegations regarding Israel's conduct of hostilities, in part because there is insufficient information either from Israel or other reliable sources to verify such claims. Nevertheless, it is the assessment of His Majesty's Government that Israel could reasonably do more to ensure that life-saving food and medical supplies reach civilians in Gaza, in the light of the appalling humanitarian situation.

This Government are also deeply concerned by credible claims of mistreatment of detainees, which the International Committee of the Red Cross cannot investigate after being denied access to places of detention. Both my predecessor and all our major allies have repeatedly and forcefully raised these concerns with the Israeli Government. Regrettably, those concerns have not been addressed satisfactorily.

Secondly, there can be no doubt that Hamas pays not the slightest heed to international humanitarian law and endangers civilians by embedding itself in the tightly concentrated civilian population and in civilian infrastructure. There is no equivalence between Hamas terrorists—or indeed Iran and its partners and proxies—

and Israel's democratic Government, but to license arms exports to Israel we must assess its compliance with international humanitarian law, notwithstanding the abhorrence of its opponents' tactics and ideology.

Thirdly, this is not a blanket ban or an arms embargo. The suspension targets around 30 of approximately 350 licences to Israel in total, for items that could be used in the current conflict in Gaza. The rest will continue. The action we are taking will not have a material impact on Israel's security. This suspension covers only items that might be used in the current conflict. There are a number of export licences that we have assessed are not for military use in the current conflict and therefore do not require suspension. They include items that are not being used by the Israel Defense Forces in the current conflict, such as trainer aircraft or other naval equipment. They also include export licences for civilian use, covering a range of products such as food-testing chemicals, telecoms, and data equipment. This suspension will not prejudice the international, collaborative, global F35 programme that supplies aircraft for more than 20 countries, which is crucial to wider peace and security. Indeed, the effects of suspending all licences for the F35 programme would undermine the global F35 supply chain that is vital for the security of the UK, our allies and NATO. Therefore, the Business and Trade Secretary has exempted these licences from his decision.

Fourthly, the Government will keep our position under review. Commitment to comply with international humanitarian law is not the only criterion in making export licensing decisions. We will continue to work with our allies to improve the situation. Foreign policy, of course, involves tough choices, but I will always seek to take such decisions in line with our principles and I will keep the House updated, in line with my previous commitment.

We do not take this decision lightly, but we note that, on previous occasions, Ministers from all parts of the House—Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat—chose not to license exports to Israel. In 1982, Margaret Thatcher imposed a full arms embargo and an oil embargo on Israel as it fought in Lebanon. Conflicts in Gaza prompted Gordon Brown to suspend five licences in 2009, and Vince Cable chose not to issue new licences while conducting a review in 2014. Like them, this Government take seriously their role in applying export licensing law, reflecting the published criteria and the specific circumstances. But let me leave this House in no doubt: the UK continues to support Israel's right to self-defence in accordance with international law.

In April, British fighter jets intercepted Iranian missiles aimed at Israel, preventing significant loss of civilian life. We supported robust action against the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen, who have attacked Israel directly as well as Israeli-linked shipping. Iran should be in no doubt of our commitment to challenge its reckless and destabilising activity in the region and across the world. We will continue to work hand in glove with our international partners to stand up to Iranian aggression and malign activity wherever it is found, and we continue to hold Iran to account, including through extensive sanctions.

Today, we are doing so again. We are announcing new sanctions on four Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps force targets, which have a role in supporting Iranian proxy actions in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Through the UK's dedicated Iran sanctions regime we have sanctioned more than 400 Iranian individuals and entities. Through our work with partners, we are exposing and containing Iran's destabilising weapons development, where soon we will be introducing further regulations to bolster existing bans on the export of goods and technology significant to Iran's production of drones and missiles.

Let me be clear: we will continue to work with Israel and our partners to tackle the threat from Iran across the region. This Government will continue to stand for Israel's security, and we will always do so in a manner consistent with our obligations to domestic and international law. I commend this Statement to the House".

3.46 pm

Lord Callanan (Con): My Lords, I thank the Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Government for the Statement yesterday, but I found their position deeply disappointing. The Foreign Secretary produced no evidence that Israel is in fact breaching humanitarian law as it goes about its legitimate right of self-defence following the barbaric Hamas attack. To announce this on the day that funerals were taking place for the latest six hostages who were brutally executed by Hamas shows a profound sense of doing something at the wrong time.

The Government have decided to suspend less than 10% of the arms export licences and the UK supplies only about 1% of Israel's defence equipment, so it is clear that, thankfully, this decision will have no material impact on Israel's ongoing military operations. However, the process of doing this has caused a rift with our US allies and has alienated no less a person than the Chief Rabbi, as well as many other western Governments.

The Government now found themselves in a strange position. Only a matter of weeks ago, the Royal Air Force helped to shoot down Iranian missiles aimed at Israel, but they are now revoking some of the export licences that allow Israel to obtain the equipment to defend itself from those same missile attacks. It is clear to me that the reasoning behind this shameful announcement is nothing to do with humanitarian law and everything to do with appeasing a vocal, left-wing, pro-Hamas minority which resides, unfortunately, on Labour's Back Benches in the House of Commons.

Lord Purvis of Tweed (LD): My Lords, I welcome the Government's decision in the Statement. I consider it balanced and welcome not only the Statement but the summary that was published. It means that this Government are aligned with the previous measured decision taken in 2014 to ensure that the United Kingdom does not issue licences where there is a valid concern about potential breaches of international humanitarian law. I believe that the rationale behind the Government's decision is sound.

However, can the Minister confirm that this position is not final and that the process is dynamic? The Statement relates specifically to the IDF, and I note

and share the Government's view that nothing in these measures puts at risk Israel's right to self-defence as an independent state and ally of the United Kingdom. Concerns have been raised, both by the United Kingdom Government and previously by the United States State Department review, about other elements of the Israeli Government. Some actions have included using civilian matériel to bulldoze civilian areas in Gaza to make them uninhabitable. This is a breach of an occupying power's responsibilities. Some of this equipment was manufactured in the United Kingdom.

These Benches agree that much more needs to be done now to ensure that life-saving aid is provided to Gaza. The latest reports by United Nations OCHA for August have reported that only 69 trucks—not the minimum of 500 a day—are getting into Gaza. Some of this is obviously the responsibility of Hamas, which needs to be roundly condemned for preventing aid being distributed through its disruption, but there is also responsibility on the Israeli Government to ensure that there are no unnecessary blockages. I raised this issue with the noble Lord, Lord Ahmad, month after month, and I hope that the Minister will agree.

It has also been profoundly depressing that Hamas has prevented the International Committee of the Red Cross having access to those who have been hostages. But it also must be of concern that, as has been raised, the Israeli Government have refused access by the ICRC to places of detention for Palestinian prisoners. This cannot be. This is 2024, not 1924.

The situation in the West Bank is obviously of great concern, and the Statement highlights that. There have been 150 Palestinian children killed in the West Bank, and we have now seen the expansion of outposts. I am sure the House is aware that outposts are different from settlements because outposts are illegal under Israeli law, but their expansion is now happening with impunity. Will the Government consider the widening of the very welcome sanctions against settlers to those who are providing facilitation, empowerment and financing for the expansion of outposts? These Benches have called for those in government in the coalition to be sanctioned, so will the Minister reassure us that there is no limit to the consideration of who will be sanctioned to ensure that there is no impunity for breaches of Israeli law when it comes to outposts?

Finally, I share with many the terrible horror of the families of those who have been hostages. The news over the weekend was devastating. I met Rachel Goldberg-Polin during my visit to the region in February. Her humanity and that of her family were profound, and anyone who watched her eulogy at Hersh's funeral will have seen that. It touched everybody's hearts. She told me in my meeting that she had sympathy and affinity with the mothers of Palestinian children who have also been harmed as a result of this conflict. She told me that there is no competition of pain and tears, just a lot of pain and tears. What actions are the Government taking with our allies to ensure that any ceasefire agreement can be brought about speedily to ensure that those remaining hostages are released and the suffering of the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank can come to an end?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Baroness Chapman of Darlington) (Lab): I thank both noble Lords for their contributions. This Government are completely committed to upholding international law. On day one in office, the Foreign Secretary commissioned a thorough review into Israel's compliance with international humanitarian law, given the grave concerns about the conduct and consequences of the war in Gaza for civilians. The UK's robust export licensing criteria state that the Government will

"not issue export licences if there is a clear risk"—

not if this has happened, but if there is a risk—

"that the items might be used to commit or facilitate serious violations of international humanitarian law".

On completion of that review, this Government concluded that a clear risk did exist. This means that, under the criteria, we are required to suspend certain export licences for items that could be used in the current conflict in Gaza.

This decision is none the less a matter of deep regret. Alongside our allies, we have repeatedly communicated to the Israeli Government our concerns regarding the humanitarian situation in Gaza, and that review found that those concerns had not been addressed. We are, remain, and will always be, fully committed to Israel's security against threats from Iran and other regional actors. We demonstrated this in April, as the noble Lord said, when a British fighter jet intercepted an Iranian missile. But our priority remains, as the noble Lord from the Liberal Democrat Benches said, achieving a ceasefire in Gaza that will see those hostages released, civilians protected, and aid finally flood in.

3.55 pm

Lord Turnberg (Lab): My Lords, the distinction between offensive and defensive weapons is very difficult to discern if you are in a war zone and in a country facing thousands of rockets every day from Hezbollah, such that you have had to evacuate 60,000 of your citizens from the north and from around Gaza. You begin to wonder why Britain is stopping this rather small amount of arms being delivered, in what is a major propaganda coup for Israel's enemies. Is it not perverse that, at a time when Britain says it will defend Israel against attack by Iran, it is also limiting Israel's ability to defend itself? It is irrational—and is it not wrong?

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): My Lords, it is not irrational because it is about complying with international law and our own commitments. The UK remains fully committed to Israel's security against threats. This Government supported that approach in opposition, and we have also taken action against threats from the Houthis. The suspension is targeted just at items for use in military operations in the current conflict in Gaza.

The Lord Bishop of Gloucester: My Lords, I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for holding together the trauma of the Israeli hostages and their families and communities, and that of the families and communities of Gaza.

I am very concerned that, as has been said by the noble Lord, Lord Purvis, we do not lose sight of the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories of the West Bank.

I had the painful privilege of visiting there very recently and I was deeply perturbed, not least by the growing settler activity and, as has been said, the illegal settler outposts, including the abhorrent attack and subsequent dispossession of the Kissieh family of Palestinian Christians near Bethlehem. Will the Government take action on this as well as on the issue of arms licences?

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): My Lords, the situation in Gaza is horrifying and we are all appalled by the scale of civilian casualties. From the Prime Minister down, we have repeatedly urged Israel to improve aid access, minimise civilian casualties and engage seriously with negotiations for that ceasefire deal. Our priority remains achieving a ceasefire in Gaza that will see the hostages released.

The UK is also deeply concerned by the ongoing IDF military operation in the occupied West Bank, while recognising Israel's need to defend itself against security threats. We are deeply worried by the methods that have been deployed and by reports of casualties and the destruction of infrastructure.

Lord Pannick (CB): My Lords, will the Minister address one of the points made by the noble Lord, Lord Callanan, in his compelling observations? If it is really necessary and appropriate to make a gesture of this sort—and it is no more than a gesture—is it not remarkably insensitive and, indeed, insulting to our democratic ally to do so on the very day when Israel is burying hostages who were detained for 11 months in appalling conditions and then brutally murdered in cold blood by Hamas?

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): The noble Lord is right in what he says about the brutal murder in cold blood by Hamas, and we deplore it. The timing of this was purely a consequence of the legal process that the Foreign Secretary completed, yesterday being the first day that Parliament sat. He was obliged to report his decision to Parliament at the earliest opportunity.

Lord Gold (Con): My Lords, why do His Majesty's Government not understand that imposing an arms embargo on Israel plays into Hamas's hands? Indeed, as has just been said, announcing this on the day when it was discovered that six Israeli hostages had been brutally murdered shows the Government's total insensitivity and lack of care for the democratic state they claim to befriend. This follows the Government's wholly wrong withdrawal of their challenge to the decision of the ICC to issue a warrant for the arrest of the Israeli Prime Minister and their restoration of funding to UNRWA even though UNRWA employees took part in the 7 October massacre. All this is a powerful message to Hamas that that its terrorism will be rewarded. This is not the way the UK should treat its friends and allies. Will the Minister let me know whether this is just poor judgment, ineptitude or something more sinister?

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): I should make it clear to the noble Lord that this is not, as he suggests, an embargo. It is a restriction on a very small

number of pieces of equipment and it is in order for us to comply with international law. That is the extent of it. UK-Israel co-operation on defence and security remains vital. We will work together to deter malign threats from Iran, protect mutual security interests and develop capabilities, ensuring critical national infrastructure and mutual resilience in cyberspace. We will work together. Israel is our ally. We support its right to defend itself. This is not an embargo.

Baroness Northover (LD): I am sure that the Minister is aware that on 16 August an FCDO official, Mark Smith, resigned on the basis that:

“Ministers claim that the UK has one of the most ‘robust and transparent’ arms export licensing regimes in the world, however this is the opposite of the truth”.

He went on to say:

“To export arms to any nation, the UK must be satisfied that the recipient nation has in place robust procedures to avoid civilian casualties and to minimize harm to civilian life. It is impossible to argue that Israel is doing that”.

I am sure that the Minister will not comment on the case of Mr Smith, but can we be reassured that the Government will apply the rules without fear or favour as to the country in question?

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): The noble Baroness is correct that I am unable to comment on the case of an individual, but she can be assured on her latter point. I invite her to read the summary that we published yesterday alongside the Statement.

Lord Harries of Pentregarth (CB): We are of course all totally appalled by the scale of civilian casualties. The question is, what is the real cause? Is it, as Israel says, Hamas having dug itself into civilian areas—schools, hospitals and so on—or is it the huge amount of weaponry Israel has used, such as 2,000 lb bombs with a killing range of 800 metres? It is very important for the truth to come out in the end. As soon as there is a permanent ceasefire, will the Minister consider encouraging the UN to set up a fact-finding mission in order that we get a more balanced view of what has been happening on the ground? In the long-term, the truth of what has been happening really matters.

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): The discovery of the truth in these situations can take many forms. The action the noble and right reverend Lord proposes relies on us achieving that ceasefire and that, at the moment, will remain the Government’s priority.

Lord Deben (Con): Will not the Minister accept that it is crucial for the future of Israel that international law be upheld? We stand by Israel because she is a country guaranteed by international law. That means that we in this country have to make sure that we uphold international law, which is why the Minister has put forward the case that she has. It is also important to remind Israel that international law defines the boundaries of Israel and that there are actions that undermine international law. In circumstances where there is very fierce argument on both sides, and where

there is no acceptance of Hamas’s appalling behaviour, it is still important for the future of Israel that we stand by international law.

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): The noble Lord is completely right in what he says about international law. We will continue to work closely with our allies to promote international law in every area of policy. We are working as hard as we possibly can, alongside many others, most notably Qatar, to try to achieve negotiation, which is the only way ultimately that we will get to the ceasefire that we all so want to see.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Con): My Lords, I would like to develop that point. I think I speak for the whole House, and for anyone who has met with the hostage families, in recognising the nature of their pain and suffering, and likewise, as one of those who have visited the region, in recognising the suffering of the Palestinians in Gaza. Many innocent lives have been lost in this conflict, and the first casualty of war, as we know, is truth. In pursuit of peace, could the Minister update your Lordships’ House on the specifics of the negotiations that Qatar and Egypt have been conducting together with the United States? Ultimately, these are what are needed to deliver an end to this conflict. Also, for the medium and long-term security of Israel and the future state of Palestine, a solution must be worked in phases, starting with a ceasefire in Gaza.

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): The suggestion of an update on negotiations may well be helpful. It is not something that I am in a position to provide now; it is perhaps something worthy of a longer discussion when time allows. I will definitely convey that suggestion to my colleague, my noble friend Lord Collins, when he returns from his visit to Rwanda.

Baroness Foster of Oxtun (Con): My Lords, I do not believe the action taken by this Government has anything to do with international law. We see Hamas carrying out war crimes on a daily basis. Does the Minister agree with me that trying to defend the indefensible will not wash with the majority of people in this country?

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): I will let the people of this country decide what will wash and what will not wash with them. This is not the indefensible. This is sticking to, adhering to, international law. It is as simple as that. We have been very clear about our continued desire to be a close ally of Israel and our firm commitment to supporting Israel in defending itself.

Lord Shinkwin (Con): Can I ask the Minister to what degree she thinks this announcement will persuade Hamas to stop sacrificing its own people in its genocidal quest to eradicate Israel and, indeed, wipe it off the face of the earth?

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): We repeatedly, wholeheartedly and consistently condemn the actions of Hamas. Hamas is not the Palestinian people. It is an organisation that has taken children and murdered

[BARONESS CHAPMAN OF DARLINGTON]
children. There is nothing more that we can say that we have not already said that can more strongly convey our view or condemn the actions of Hamas.

Lord Polak (Con): My Lords, I refer the House to my registered interests. In his Statement, the Foreign Secretary—using interesting English—said:

“This Government are not an international court. We have not, and could not, arbitrate on whether or not Israel has breached international humanitarian law. This is a forward-looking evaluation”—

whatever that means—

“not a determination of innocence or guilt”.

I am not a lawyer—there are many eminent lawyers in this House—but, as a result of “Perhaps/maybe Israel is doing this”, the Government have made decisions on stopping these licences. Could the Minister explain how they can make that decision based on “perhaps/maybe”?

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): Perhaps, unfortunately, the law requires that that is what we do. The law does not require us to assess whether international humanitarian law has been broken; the test laid down in legislation in this country is about the risk that the equipment we are selling may be used to break it. That is the legal test, and this Government stick to the law.

Baroness Fox of Buckley (Non-Aff): My Lords, does the Minister understand that one of the concerns is that Israel is treated differently and held to a higher standard than any other country in the world? I am delighted to hear that international law is all-seeing and so on, but I have noted how many arms sales there have been to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. Is the Minister really telling me that, every time David Lammy and his lawyers have looked at it, they have said: “My goodness, Yemen is an absolute haven of peace, and no humanitarian law has been broken”? I am just suggesting that people are rather confused, and it feels disingenuous and as though Israel is being punished, pointed at, demonised and told that it is in breach of humanitarian law. It is not—no matter what you say—it is defending itself. It is being punished morally, even if the amount of arms does not really matter.

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Lab): This is not about punishing Israel. Israel is our ally, and we support it and support its right to defend itself. This decision is consistent with the law we are obliged to follow. I understand, of course, the point about Israel not wishing to be treated differently. That is why the tone of the Statement yesterday was as it was. That is why we are clear that this decision is limited; it is not an embargo and is made with regret.

Violent Disorder *Statement*

The following Statement was made in the House of Commons on Monday 2 September.

“With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will now make a Statement on the violent disorder that occurred earlier this summer. Just before the parliamentary

Recess, I made a Statement to this House on the horrendous attack that took place in Southport on 29 July. Five weeks on, our hearts still ache for the three precious little girls who lost their lives, for their loved ones, and for the other children who were injured or endured unspeakable horror that day. The House will know that a suspect has been charged, and the investigation into the attack is ongoing. Those grieving families, the Southport community and the country will need answers, but, for that reason, the legal process must now take its course.

That day in the House, all of us came together in sorrow and in solidarity with the families and the people of Southport, and I spoke of the bravery, compassion and distress of the police, the paramedics and the firefighters I had met that morning, who were first on the scene. It is truly appalling that within hours of that Statement, the same Southport police were facing the most disgraceful violent attacks from criminals and thugs. Police officers were pelted with bricks and bottles. The local mosque—a place of worship—was subjected to violent attack. While millions of decent people across the country were praying for bereaved families, a criminal minority of thugs and extremists saw only an opportunity to hijack a town’s grief. The Merseyside chief constable, Serena Kennedy, spoke at the funeral of Alice da Silva Aguiar, where she said she hoped that anyone taking part in the violent disorder was

‘hanging their head in shame at the pain’

that they had caused the bereaved family.

In the days that followed, we saw further disgraceful violent disorder in a number of towns and cities. There were repeated attacks on the same police officers whose job it is to keep communities safe, and over 100 officers were injured. In Sunderland, a Citizens Advice branch was set alight. In Liverpool, a library and vital community hub was torched. In Hull, shops were looted and a mosque was targeted. In Rotherham, a hotel used as asylum accommodation was set alight when people were inside. In Bolton, clashes between rival groups involved fireworks and bottles being thrown. And we saw people targeted on the streets because of the colour of their skin. This disgraceful disorder and racist hatred, including that whipped up by a hateful minority online, was an insult to those grieving over Southport.

Let us be very clear: those violent and criminal attacks were not protests. They were not about grievance. They were thuggery, racism and crime. Plenty of people across the country have strong views about crime, policing, immigration, asylum, the NHS and more, but they do not pick up bricks and throw them at the police. They do not loot shops or attack places of worship, and they do not set buildings alight knowing that other human beings are inside. There is a lot to debate on all kinds of policy issues, but no one should make excuses for violence or thuggery that risks public safety. This was brazen criminality, perpetrated in many cases by those with existing criminal convictions.

The Prime Minister and I made it clear that criminals would pay the price for their violence, and we meant it. The Prime Minister announced a new national violent disorder programme to bring together the best policing capabilities and enhance intelligence sharing across

forces, and Ministers worked daily with the police and criminal justice partners to ensure that there was a strong and determined response. The National Police Coordination Centre operated a national mobilisation plan to ensure that strategic reserves of public order officers were ready to be deployed in support of different police forces. More than 40,000 officer shifts were worked by public order officers over 10 days, with over 6,600 public order officers deployed on one day alone. Rest days were cancelled and additional hours were worked.

The Crown Prosecution Service deployed over 100 additional prosecutors, boosting its 24-hour charging service with additional advice from the Director of Public Prosecutions so that they could move swiftly to charge. The Ministry of Justice accelerated the work on new cells to bring 500 more prison places on stream earlier, and the Lord Chancellor made it clear that the courts stood ready to hear all the cases coming through. The Home Office established a new rapid procedure for security support for mosques to ensure that communities felt supported and safe. In total, around 1,280 people have been arrested, around 800 charges have been made and over 570 individuals had been brought before the courts for offences such as violent disorder, assaults on emergency workers, arson and encouraging violent attacks online. This robust and swift response from the Government and the criminal justice system has provided a strong deterrent and shown our steadfast determination to keep people safe. Most importantly, order was restored.

I want now to update the House on some of the next steps we will take. First, we will take forward positive policing reform to build on the important work done by the National Police Coordination Centre this summer. I want to particularly thank the chair of the National Police Chiefs' Council and the public order lead for the mobilisation work that they did, but the reality is that the co-ordination infrastructure and systems that they had to work with were too weak. I am therefore asking His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services to work quickly with the NPCC, the College of Policing and the national lead for public order to review the lessons from this summer's events so that we can ensure that strong co-ordination and intelligence systems are in place and that there is sufficient public order policing for the future.

Secondly, as well as ensuring that there is proper punishment for those responsible for this disorder, we will be pressing forward at pace with this Government's mission to take back the safety of our streets and restore respect for the police and the rule of law. We will put thousands more neighbourhood police officers and police community support officers back on the streets, reversing the collapse in community policing and rebuilding the relationship between local communities and forces. This Government are very clear that wherever and whenever violence and disorder emerge—whether in Hartlepool or Harehills, Sunderland or Stoke—we expect crimes to have consequences and perpetrators to face the full force of the law. The criminal violence we saw after the Southport attacks was not the only violent disorder this summer. We also saw disgraceful arson and attacks on the police in Harehills. In that

case, 32 people have been arrested and in the past week three men have pleaded guilty to arson and violent disorder after a bus was set alight.

Thirdly, I have been concerned for a long time that not enough is being done to counter extremism—including both Islamist extremism and far-right extremism—as there has been no proper strategy in place since 2015. I have ordered a rapid review of extremism to ensure that we have the strongest possible response to the poisonous ideologies that corrode community cohesion and fray the fabric of our democracy. Alongside that, the Deputy Prime Minister is overseeing cross-government work to consider how we support our communities and address issues of cohesion in the longer term.

Fourthly, the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology will strengthen the requirements for social media companies to take responsibility for the poison being proliferated on their platforms with the rollout of the measures in the Online Safety Act 2023, and we will continue to be clear that criminal content online results in criminal sanctions offline. Fifthly, we stand ready to support the police through the special grant for policing, and the Home Office will work with police and crime commissioners to ensure that the Riot Compensation Act 2016 works effectively in the areas that are affected.

The country recoiled in horror at the scenes of violence and disorder in some cities and towns earlier this summer, but let there be no doubt: the minority of criminals and thugs who sought to cause havoc do not represent Britain. Instead, across the country we saw decent people coming together to support each other, to clean up the damage and to rebuild communities: the bricklayers who repaired the wall of the Southport mosque; the residents who donated funds and books to restock the Spellow library; and the volunteers in Sunderland who found a new site to offer community advice. There are many more examples, and those small, unassuming acts of selflessness should serve as a message to the criminals and extremists that they do not speak for Britain and they never will. I commend this Statement to the House."

4.12 pm

Lord Sharpe of Epsom (Con): My Lords, this is the first opportunity we have had in this House to express our sorrow at the events in Southport and our sympathy to the family and friends of the victims. It was an appalling tragedy, and they all have my sincere condolences and I hope those who were injured make full and speedy recoveries. I also take this opportunity to extend similar sympathies and condolences to the family and friends of Cher Maximen and Mussie Imnetu who were killed at the Notting Hill Carnival.

I thank the Home Secretary for making the Statement yesterday. I am quite sure that the Minister had his summer seriously disrupted by the dreadful violence and disorder that we saw on our streets. By and large, I think that the police and the Government dealt with this violence well. There can never be any excuse for this type of behaviour, and I agree with the Home Secretary that this was thuggish and criminal activity. There are plenty of ways to express legitimate frustrations and points of view in this country, and many do

[LORD SHARPE OF EPSOM]

without resorting to violence and intimidation. Acting at speed to quell the disturbances was the right thing to do, and I commend the Minister for his part in that.

However, the Home Secretary's Statement yesterday also prompted a number of questions which deserve to be explored. First, the Home Secretary described actions taken by the NPCC and referenced that:

"the co-ordination infrastructure and systems that they had to work with were too weak".

Can the Minister expand on that and explain which systems were too weak and why? He will be aware of a phrase that I had to repeatedly deploy when I was in his shoes—often to my regret—that our police forces retain operational independence. That phrase may be frustrating on occasions, but it also describes an important underlying principle that Ministers, while no doubt "working daily"—to quote the Home Secretary again—should not get involved in operational matters. I have no doubt the Minister will agree with that.

Following on from that, what are the terms of reference for the review that the Home Secretary has commissioned to ensure that there is

"sufficient public order policing for the future"?

What does "sufficient" mean? At this point, I will refrain from passing comment on the efforts of the noble Lord's party to frustrate the previous Government's public order efforts.

The Home Secretary also talked about rebuilding respect for the police. I agree, but would remind the House that this is not simply about numbers. The previous Government fulfilled our promises and ensured that there were more policemen on our streets than ever before, but numbers are not everything. Policemen have to be tasked with doing the right jobs, and that is inconsistent across the country. I obviously hope that the Government succeed in their aim to rebuild community policing, but I fear that the Minister will soon be talking about operational independence again. How many community officers do the Government expect to recruit and where will they go?

The Home Secretary talked about countering extremism, and that is of course welcome. She referenced Islamist and far-right extremism, but I note made no mention at all of far-left extremism. Why not? I am sorry to say that the far left is in large part responsible for the most enduring form of racism: that of anti-Semitism. That is worse now than in my lifetime, and it sickens and disgusts. I will be charitable and allow that those who conflate what is happening in the Middle East with the British Jewish community are just stupid, but some will not be, and they are just as manipulative as those who foment hatred of other groups and individuals. Can the Minister reassure us that the previous Government's work supporting CREST and the Jewish community will continue, and that anti-Semitism and those stoking it will be met with the full force of the law?

My final questions relate to—I choose my words very carefully here—perceived inconsistencies in the policing of protest. I stress again that the response to this summer's riots was appropriate and that the Government deserve praise for their commendable actions, but there is a lingering suspicion that some

riots and disorder attract more robust attention than others. Referring back to my previous question, there was clear evidence of anti-Semitism on our streets in relation to Israel/Gaza, and I know that the police have now made many arrests. I understand, of course, that it can be difficult to make arrests during a demonstration; the police are usually heavily outnumbered, so that could cause more trouble. Nevertheless, the impression created was one of a degree of tolerance for the chanting of well-worn anti-Semitic tropes and the display of symbols sympathetic to proscribed terrorist organisations. Similarly, in Harehills, in Leeds the police seemingly disappeared when the Romanian Roma community rioted. Why? I note that arrests are now being made, and that is welcome, but surely the response should have been more robust at the time. If there is a good operational reason why that was not the case then I am more than happy to hear it, but I would like an answer.

Finally—I have little doubt that the Minister will agree—there can never be any room for statements from politicians that can be read as equivocation in these matters. Violence and disorder of the type that we saw across the summer is always wrong; any suspicion that this is not the case will merely fuel the keyboard warriors and stoke yet more trouble. The first step towards rebuilding trust in the police is consistency, so I hope that the noble Lord will take my questions in the constructive way that they are intended. None of us wants to see more of this and we all want the police to succeed.

Baroness Hussein-Ece (LD): My Lords, the shocking deaths of three little girls in Southport, followed by the shocking disorder on our streets perpetrated by a minority of violent thugs, was truly frightening. There was racist mob violence in our towns and cities, clearly incited and organised by far-right groups and individuals—mainly online, where shockingly they shared the locations of hotels and hostels housing asylum seekers and migrants. We saw footage of thugs trying to set fire to some hotels, terrifying the people in them. The locations of immigration offices were leaked online, so they were facing attacks as well.

The bravery and professionalism of the police and emergency services are to be commended. They were dealing with what was sometimes an impossible job. However, it is disappointing that the Official Opposition has not mentioned the targeted attack on Muslim communities. They were clearly the focus of these attacks; online, we saw the most appalling Islamophobia and hate crimes. That affects not just Muslims in this country but those perceived to be Muslims, who were of course migrants and asylum seekers—and anyone perceived to be a supporter of or even associated with asylum seekers, or from an ethnic-minority community. I know of what I speak: members of my own family in some of these communities that were targeted, who wear visible headscarves, were terrified. Some of them felt that they could not stay in their homes, in an area such as Walthamstow that was targeted.

Does the Minister agree that to tackle record levels of hate crimes against Muslims we need a consistent and coherent approach to tackling Islamophobia, underpinned by a working definition to better understand

what Islamophobia is and is not, in the way that we have—quite rightly—a working definition of anti-Semitism? Six years ago, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims put forward the first working definition of Islamophobia after two years of consultation with 800 community groups up and down the country, with all faiths and with victims of hate crimes. That definition was accepted by all parties, apart from the last Government. Will this Government look to revisit that, and start to come to a proper understanding and definition of what we mean by Islamophobia? Do they intend to appoint an independent adviser on Islamophobia—a post that has been vacant for two years? Discrimination, prejudice and hatred damage everyone and the fabric of our society. We must work together to challenge it.

The Statement mentions far-right extremism, which has been on the rise. We saw some people on the streets with signs depicting Nazi emblems. Make no mistake, these people are entrenched in anti-Semitism if they support Nazi symbols and that kind of behaviour. The Statement mentions a review. Can the Minister set out whether enough attention is being given to tackling far-right extremism? Can he say a bit more about how the Government intend to look into that in the review?

The Minister of State, Home Office (Lord Hanson of Flint) (Lab): I thank noble Lords for their contributions. Like the noble Lord on the Opposition Front Bench, I start my response where he started his: with the families of the victims in Southport and the families of the victims in Notting Hill. I cannot begin to imagine the pain that they have gone through, attending a dance class or a carnival and then finding dead bodies of young children and family members at the end of those events. We need to put that at the forefront of our minds. When the event happened on the Monday just before recess, our first thoughts were with the families.

The noble Lord mentioned—as was echoed by the noble Baroness from the Liberal Democrat Front Bench—that there is no excuse for the actions that followed the incident in Southport. It was thuggery and it was appalling behaviour, and it was in much part orchestrated by forces that we need to examine in the longer term and deal with accordingly.

For the interest of the House, we had 40,000 police hours over the course of those riots. I pay tribute from this Front Bench to police officers who gave up their leave, faced attacks, and stood for the values of this House and this Parliament in defending individuals from the Islamic community, and from other communities, who were under attack from forces which should have known better. Such forces will now have time to reflect, during their time in prison following judicial exercise, fair guilty pleas and/or—in due course—criminal convictions.

The noble Lord mentioned police independence. We fully support police independence. However, he will know that the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary, me and other Ministers in the Home Office met police shortly after those events to encourage and understand the response that they were going to make independently. Make no mistake, when criminal acts of intimidation and Islamophobia are committed, properties are burned down and legitimate sources of government support

for asylum seekers are attacked, the courts will take action. Ultimately, those who have committed these crimes—if found guilty or pleading guilty—will face considerable sentences. That has been shown in the response to this House.

Both Front Benches have mentioned the question of a review. My right honourable friend the Home Secretary, the Prime Minister and the Home Office team will undertake a review not just of the incidents and the response, and not just of the capability of the response or how it was organised, but of the underlying factors behind those concerns. It will be a review of what led individuals across towns and cities in this United Kingdom to pick up rocks, attack their fellow citizens and attack not just people seeking asylum but long-standing residents with businesses in this country. That is not acceptable behaviour, and I hope that the government response, which I know the noble Lord on the Front Bench opposite has accepted, responded well to that point and has helped to close down the initial concern. But there remain long-term concerns that we need to deal with.

I say to both Front Benches that extremism on all sides is something that we have to take cognisance of; we must be responsible in our approach to it and look at the underlying causes. There is much radicalisation online; there are people in bedrooms on their own being radicalised from both the left and the right, and on a whole range of issues. We need to look at that in the longer term, and my right honourable friend in the House of Commons, Peter Kyle, the Secretary of State for DSIT, is going to look at how Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms have responded and encouraged by their use what happened in the events that we have just seen.

The noble Lord's question on anti-Semitism is equally as important as the point about Islamophobia. I want to see individuals in this society respected for their beliefs. I was very pleased to see, in discussions I had with members of the Church of England, that they had reached out to colleagues from the Jewish and Muslim communities and, particularly in Southport, had stood side by side to show support and that we have respect for religious beliefs. We respect the differences in those religious beliefs and understand that people live their lives and live their religious beliefs differently, but all have a right to live, breathe and support themselves in the communities that we represent. That question of tolerance is one that should come from this House.

Let there be no mistake that a crime is a crime, and when people throw rocks, abuse, intimidate, organise on social media or encourage others to do so—we have 90 convictions of people who encouraged people to burn down asylum seekers' properties—those are crimes. Those people will be held to account independently of Ministers and of the police, ultimately. The CPS will decide whether to charge, a court will determine whether guilt or innocence is in place and a sentence will be passed. That is a message that we will share—and I know that the noble Lord shares that message too.

I have a final point to make in response to points made by the noble Baroness on the Liberal Front Bench. She is right that the question of Islamophobia is extremely important. We live in a multicultural

[LORD HANSON OF FLINT]

society. These are people of the Islamic faith who have been born here and whose fathers and mothers have been born here. It is not an issue of race but an issue of faith, and people have the right to express their faith openly, in accordance with their principles. One thing that we did in response to the attacks was to provide additional support to mosques in a protection fund. To go back to the point about anti-Semitism, that has applied equally to Jewish community organisations and facilities. We will continue to do that.

The message that this House should send out is quite clear. We live in a decent society, and those people who committed those offences did so in a way that is offensive to this House. We will collectively review what happened, look at what needs to be done and look at the underlying causes, but ultimately make sure that we have a tolerant, fair and open society.

4.28 pm

The Lord Bishop of Southwark: My Lords, I express appreciation to the Minister and his right honourable friend the Home Secretary for the Government's Statement. I extend heartfelt sympathy to the families of the victims of recent violent disorder. I support the Government's strong and determined response, including the swift apprehension of perpetrators and bringing them to justice. I also applaud the strong and positive signal that this sends: protest cannot extend to violence and abuse. I am grateful that Members of the House have spoken so powerfully on the evil of anti-Semitic, Islamophobic and racist incidents, which the Minister rightly addressed as criminality. In addition to the measures announced, are His Majesty's Government seeking to address, perhaps through an inquiry, some of the underlying economic and social issues that can render people vulnerable to exploitation and incitement, to their own cost and to the detriment of the wider community?

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): I am grateful to the right reverend Prelate for his response and the questions he has brought forward today. I am particularly pleased, as I mentioned, with the support that was given at the time of the incidents and the discussions we have had with colleagues around the response at a local level from members of the Church of England. I also welcome the condemnation he echoed of violent acts. He will know that the issues of community cohesion he mentioned are difficult issues to deal with, but ones that it is essential that this House and the Government grasp and take forward. I hope he will welcome that the Deputy Prime Minister is going to be leading on community cohesion. We will be looking at what we can do to bring groups together to look at how we bring together all the issues to which both Front Benches have referred.

While I cannot give assurances today on timescales or terms of reference, these will be issues that this House and the House of Commons return to regularly, because we have to tackle the underlying causes of individuals feeling alienated from society. There is no excuse for that behaviour—it is criminal behaviour and will be dealt with as criminal behaviour—but we still have to understand the reasons why people have

fallen into that criminal behaviour, just as we would on any other aspect of criminal behaviour. I give the right reverend Prelate the assurance that that will be undertaken by the Deputy Prime Minister and others in the coming months.

Lord Carlile of Berriew (CB): My Lords, in welcoming everything that has been said so far in this debate, and welcoming my old friend to this House and to the Front Bench, I ask him whether he agrees that the actions of online entities such as Channel3Now in Pakistan, allowing online advertising sites to make money by purveying violent, demonstrably deliberate untruths about the country we live in, is wholly unacceptable. I suggest that at least the possibility of further regulation should be used to compel internet entities to see it as their duty to refute the broadcasting of such content.

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): It is nice to see the noble Lord, Lord Carlile, again. We have seen each other in a number of guises over the years, and I am as surprised as he is to find myself here today responding to these issues. He raises an extremely important and valid point. Much of the content that fired the organisation of some of the events we saw, not just in Southport but across the whole United Kingdom, began its life in an internet or social media post that encouraged poor behaviour, not just in the UK but, as the noble Lord said, outside the United Kingdom.

The Online Safety Act was passed by both Houses in the last Parliament and was the child of the previous Government. The level of implementation of some of the measures in that Act needs to be looked at. My right honourable friend Peter Kyle, the Secretary of State for DSIT, has met with social media providers to look at the internet and what role it played, and we will review the policy over time. This is an organically growing issue, but the points the noble Lord mentioned are extremely valid, are registered by this Government and are ones that this Government will look at and take forward in due course.

Lord Reid of Cardowan (Lab): My Lords, I welcome my former colleague to the Dispatch Box again, though in a different Chamber. First, I congratulate the Government on their response to those who used violence and hatred during the period of which we are speaking. They were decisive and fair and observed the separation between politics and operational capabilities. I think it reassured a great many people in this country that the Government acted so quickly and so decisively.

Secondly, I will say how much I welcomed the Minister's comments about addressing—to use an old cliché—not only crime but the causes of crime. There is no doubt in my mind that there are deep underlying causes to what we saw. The Minister mentioned online social media. I believe they are instrumental but not the underlying causes. In my view, the underlying causes lie in the poisoned chalice that the Government have been given of apparently unlimited immigration, huge reductions in public services and the language used for the past 10 years describing immigrants as “dangerous aliens” whether they are legal or illegal immigrants. Can my noble friend assure me that the

Labour Government will address all three causes over the next few years: the nature and level of immigration, the language used about it and the protection of public services? If we do not address those causes, this sort of thing will happen again.

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): Again, I am grateful to my noble friend for his contribution. He knows as much as anybody in this House, given his previous role as Home Secretary, about the difficult challenges that we face here.

To assure him on the Prime Minister's commitment, we want to review how the policing capability was undertaken. That is not to interfere with operational policing but, following the Prime Minister's announcement of the national violent disorder programme, to try to bring together good practice, look at where there needs to be resilience and make sure that forces support each other, which is a natural part of the policing landscape. It is extremely important to review what happened. As has been mentioned, we need to look at what happened at Harehills; there may not have been sufficient policing to deal with it. There is a whole range of issues and we can learn lessons. It is not for a Minister to direct chief constables, of the Met or anywhere else, but it is for a Minister to hold them to account and ensure that people, as mentioned by both Front Benches, are protected as a whole.

My noble friend also mentioned the whole question of migration. I spent a long period over the past 10 years as shadow Immigration Minister and know that it is a toxic debate at times. In my view, immigration falls into three or four categories: immigration for everyone from the centre forward of a football team through to a professor or somebody else coming to this country because they are an expert in their field and bringing a contribution to the growth of our economy, versus people coming on a boat seeking asylum or people coming here completely illegally. The debate needs to be put into the context of how we manage that. We need to detoxify the debate to ensure that we deal with asylum and speed up asylum claims; deal with people who have come here illegally, because we must have integrity in the migration system; and make sure that, in doing that, we do not turn away people who will help us grow our economy or bring skills and challenges to our society.

That is all on the agenda. I am still surprised that we are only seven weeks into this Government. We will look at those issues and I will report on progress to this House on a regular basis, as well as being held to account over the next few years.

Lord Hogan-Howe (CB): My Lords, I join in condemning the attacks on police officers, mosques and asylum seekers and the places where people believed they were. I also support the officers who carried on walking forward when they were being bricked, despite occasionally not having the full equipment. We saw, particularly in Southport, some serious injuries to officers who still kept walking forward. They did an excellent job.

I ask the Minister to consider two big issues in the review that he mentioned. First, there was clearly a lack of intelligence at times about the groups involved—

what they were planning and how many would turn up. Sometimes over the last few years it has become difficult to use some of the most intrusive surveillance gathering against political extremists. We understand why—obviously, political parties should not be targeted in that way—but, where politics veers into violence, that is a different matter altogether. It is vital that informants, undercover officers and all those intrusive things that only Home Secretaries can authorise are available to use against this type of people, whether from the left or the right—although at the moment we are particularly worried about the right and its ability to organise.

The second area that the review might consider is the number of officers that can be mobilised together quickly and in large numbers. It was mentioned that by the time that the riots started to subside, around 4,000 officers were being deployed. This sounds like a lot, but when you consider that in Notting Hill recently—where two murders sadly occurred—7,000 officers were deployed in about half a square mile, and that the riots of 2011 were only subdued when 16,000 officers were patrolling the streets of this city, I do wonder whether sufficient officers were available quickly enough.

Should things recur, I believe the Home Office has a proper, strategic role to play in this, to ensure that forces are ready and rapidly able to reinforce. I am certainly aware of forces waiting hours for reinforcements to arrive when one would hope it would be minutes.

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): Again, I am grateful to the noble Lord for bringing his significant expertise in this area to the Statement and to the long-term debate on this issue. First and foremost, I join him in paying tribute to the brave officers who held that line in the face of violent attacks that could have caused—and did cause—considerable harm to injured officers. That is a depleting factor on police forces in a particular area.

It is important to note that on Saturday 10 August, 6,675 officers were deployed in a single day to hold back criminal riotous behaviour. Those 6,675 officers put themselves on the front line, but in doing so they were also not doing other duties. That is one of the reasons why, immediately after the riots began, the Prime Minister said he would set up a national programme to look at deployment of resources, capability and how this was dealt with. I hope the noble Lord will welcome this.

The extremely important point was made that intelligence-led policing is absolutely vital to ensure that we get ahead of what is happening. That means using important—but difficult and challenging—tactics which involve looking at social media posts, tracking and looking at the capability of potential offenders and advising forces on how to deal with them in potential hotspots. I have no problem whatever in using the tools available to protect the public, because nobody forces anybody to organise a riot or to attack buildings and mosques and nobody says “Let’s burn this down” unless they are—or are potentially—going to commit criminal offences.

If we can nip those in the bud through the better organisation of policing or by the recognition of techniques that will bring convictions through the

[LORD HANSON OF FLINT]

independent forces of the law, the police, the CPS and the courts, good on that, because that will protect the type of people that the noble Baroness from the Liberal Front Bench and the noble Lord, Lord Sharpe, indicated need protecting.

Lord Caine (Con): My Lords, I was born in Harehills in Leeds, as I believe was the noble Baroness, Lady Blake of Leeds. It is a terribly deprived community and I still live about three miles from there. Will the Minister, whom I welcome to his post, join me in condemning those who immediately sought to exploit the appalling violence that took place in Harehills for their own political ends, using language that was designed only to stoke division and tension within that community, and did so from the luxury of Milwaukee? I refer, of course, to the leader of Reform UK.

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): I am grateful for the noble Lord's welcome to me coming to this position. The Member for Clacton, if that was the Member he was referring to, is responsible for his own comments, in his own way and in his own time. He should be held to account by people in Clacton and by the wider community for any comments he makes. It is not for me to comment on that; it is for him to make those comments. What I will say is that, whenever things happen—as they do—we need to look at, and take action on, that criminal behaviour and close it down. Sometimes, it happens with summer activity, with people having too much to drink over long nights; sometimes, it is fuelled by right-wing violence and, other times, it is fuelled by other activity. If, underneath that, there are long-term trends of Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, right-wing ideology or, indeed, extreme left-wing ideology, we need to look, in a cold, calm way, at what has caused that, how we deal with it, how—following the noble Lord, Lord Hogan-Howe—we intelligently police it and, ultimately, how we bring people to court if they have committed criminal offences. What Ministers can do is put the architecture together for that. The Prime Minister has been trying to look at the lessons learned from the initial response, which surprised many of us in that week after Southport, to see how we can improve that response and listen to what the police say about their own lessons. If that involves action by the Home Office in support of policing, that is what we will do.

Baroness Fox of Buckley (Non-Aff): My Lords, I know that the Government are very conscious of the UK's international reputation. I want to know whether there is any ministerial concern about the many free speech and civil liberties organisations around the world expressing shock about the degree of state-backed censorship being greenlighted in the wake of the riots. There is a worry that there is too easy a slippage and conflation between physical violence, which we can all condemn, and speech offences. The majority of people have not been incarcerated for incitement. They may have put out bigoted memes that we can deplore; none the less, people in the UK are being imprisoned not for what they do but for what they say. As there seem to be threats of more

censorship, I want the Minister to reassure me that we will not end up in a situation where these riots, which were tragic enough, will chill legitimate debate and lead to a censorious, authoritarian atmosphere where people are frightened to speak freely.

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): There is freedom of speech, and I made it very clear in the wake of the riots that people are entitled to criticise the UK Government's asylum policy, immigration policy or any aspect of UK government policy. What they are not entitled to do is to incite racial hatred, to incite criminal activity, to incite attacks on mosques or to incite burnings or other criminal, riotous behaviour. That is the threshold. The threshold is not me saying, "I do not like what they have said"—there are lots of things that I do not like that people have said; the threshold is determined by criminal law, is examined by the police and is referred to the CPS. The CPS examines whether there is a criminal charge to account for, which is then either made through a guilty plea and a sentence, which happened with the majority of people who now face time in prison, or put in front of a court for a jury of 12 peers to determine whether an offence has been committed. There is no moratorium on criticism of political policy in the United Kingdom. There is free speech in this United Kingdom, but free speech also has responsibilities, and one responsibility is not to incite people to burn down their neighbour's property.

Lord Browne of Ladyton (Lab): My Lords, my noble friend the Minister will be aware of the analysis by the European Consortium for Political Research, which was published only two weeks ago and substantially reinforces the question that my noble friend Lord Reid asked. The correlation between the location of violence and the incidence of child poverty in any area was significantly greater than the correlation between rioting and the presence of any of the other, many factors that people have attributed the violence to. Does my noble friend agree that any response to the riots must go beyond punishment and look to restore the essentials of economic equity, viable public services and greater equality, the absence of which appears to make violent disorder significantly more likely?

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): My noble friend makes extremely valid points about the examination of the causes. As I have said to this noble House, the Home Office, via the Deputy Prime Minister and her department, wishes to look at some of the wider issues of social deprivation that may or may not have contributed to these riots. However—if I can again draw both Front Benches opposite back in—we still have to focus on the points that were made in this debate: irrespective of social conditions in a particular area, scapegoating and attacking citizens or individuals who have in many cases no relationship to those causes is simply not acceptable, so they have to face the law. However, those are certainly important issues that need to be examined as part of the long-term mix on preventing further activity such as happened over this summer.

Covid-19 Inquiry

Motion to Take Note

4.50 pm

Moved by **Baroness Merron**

That this House takes note of the first report from the Covid-19 Inquiry.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Baroness Merron) (Lab): My Lords, the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, published her report from the first module of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry in July. I thank her and her team for the work that they have done to this point, and for putting the bereaved at the heart of this inquiry.

I also thank everyone who has provided evidence to the Covid-19 inquiry thus far, which has made it possible for it to carry out its important work. There are clearly vital lessons emerging from before and during the pandemic that this Government will consider in strengthening preparations for future emergencies, and that will include increasing the resilience of our public services.

Module 1 of the Covid-19 inquiry is focused entirely on whether the UK was adequately prepared and had built the necessary resilience to deal with a pandemic between 2009 and early 2020. I know that your Lordships' House will welcome this chance to debate the findings today.

Today, my thoughts, and I am sure those of all noble Lords across the House, are with the families and communities who lost loved ones because of the pandemic. Their grief is harrowing, and they lost loved ones too soon. It is heartbreaking to recall that many goodbyes were said through a screen, and many could not say goodbye at all. Many could not attend loved ones' funerals, and everyone had their lives turned upside down by Covid.

I can only imagine the distress and disappointment that are felt as a result of this report confirming what many suspected—that this country was not properly prepared. The noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, was clear that

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

She found that “processes, planning and policy” across the entire country let our people down and that there were major failings in state services, while existing health and social inequalities made us more vulnerable.

Before the pandemic hit, our public services were already badly stretched. NHS waiting lists were already too high; too little attention had been paid to our infrastructure, and workers delivering public services were already under significant pressure. The status of the health and care system at the onset of the pandemic was its “starting point”, and a more resilient system could have reduced the impact of the pandemic on the system.

The report concludes:

“The UK prepared for the wrong pandemic”,

focusing too much on influenza and too little on other pathogens. The noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, also noted that there was a lack of leadership, oversight and challenge from Ministers and officials, which weakened resilience. This report does not make pretty reading.

Reference is also made to “fatal strategic flaws” in assessing risks and a failure to learn from prior emergencies and outbreaks of disease. The report concludes that a positive analysis of the UK's preparedness sowed complacency among Ministers and officials and that too little attention was paid to how government could mitigate the most harmful consequences of a pandemic; for example, by setting up a test, trace and isolate system.

The report highlights the disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable in our society, including the elderly and those with existing health conditions. The Government asked many to shield for months, some families were stuck in overcrowded accommodation and workers in the gig economy and those on low incomes missed out on much support. We witnessed a shocking increase in domestic abuse during lockdowns, and young people's education was severely disrupted. Those with access to online learning and IT could manage to a degree, but this was not the reality for far too many children. The lessons for the future are clear: resilience has to be for our entire society and everyone in it.

The report also tells us about the state of our public services. A nation's resilience depends on the strength of its infrastructure and public services. These were simply not strong enough before the pandemic and they are not strong enough today. The NHS waiting list currently stands at more than 8 million, prisons are overcrowded, too many councils have been pushed to the brink and the Government have inherited a £22 billion black hole in the public finances which cannot be ignored.

We have already taken difficult decisions that will start to turn the situation around, but it will take time and it will take focus. It will be a long process and it is crucial that we get it right, because, as the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, says, it is not a question of if another pandemic will strike, but when. We are committed to learning the lessons of the pandemic and upholding our first responsibility: that of keeping our people safe.

I understand that the department was learning continuously throughout the pandemic, seeking to adjust its response with each lesson learned. Officials have identified five key lessons that can inform the approach to pandemic preparation, which are now being combined with the lessons we will be learning from the inquiry. I will now set out the five key lessons, which have already been shared with the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett.

The first is that responding to a range of threats needs flexible and scalable capabilities alongside plans. The evidence in module 1 has been clear that, given the unpredictability and range of possible future pandemics, it is unrealistic to try to create a specific plan for each possible new threat. Instead, there is a recognition of the need for future pandemic preparations to focus on developing a toolkit of capabilities which can flexibly pivot to address different emerging threats, and that will be backed up by sufficient resources so that they can be scaled up quickly.

Secondly, the underlying resilience of the system is essential to pandemic preparedness. High resilience means that the NHS, adult social care and public

[BARONESS MERRON]

health will be more likely to cope effectively and respond to shocks of any kind, including pandemics. At the time the pandemic struck, the NHS had very little spare flexibility in the system, as it was already operating at high capacity. Waiting times for elective care had been steadily increasing even before the pandemic, and the adult social care sector had structural challenges which significantly impaired its resilience. The Government are looking at how we ensure built-in capacity in order to respond to emergencies.

Thirdly, there must be an ability to scale up quickly. This includes ensuring that there are plans quickly to increase levels of staff, medicines and equipment. All of that is needed to mitigate and control the spread of a disease. It will mean thinking carefully about the resources that can be put aside as investment against a future emergency.

Fourthly, diagnostics and data are crucial in a pandemic response. As my noble friend Lord Vallance put it, the UK was “flying blind” at the start of the pandemic and officials were taking difficult decisions based on stark scarcity of data. Finally, pandemic plans must consider all possible modes of transmission of communicable diseases. Respiratory pathogens remain the most likely to cause future pandemics. However, changes in our environment such as those caused by climate change mean that the risks of outbreaks through some other modes of transmission are increasing. Planning must prepare for the range of transmission modes, including oral routes such as contaminated food and water; sexual and blood routes—which include diseases such as HIV, syphilis and, more recently, mpox—contact routes in diseases such as Ebola; and vector routes such as insects, which include diseases such as malaria and bubonic plague.

It is helpful to look now at recent events. The World Health Organization has declared a public health emergency of international concern because of the rapid spread of the mpox virus strain clade 1. Although currently the risk to the UK population is low, planning is under way across government, the health and care system and with our local partners to prepare for this. The spread of mpox demonstrates that issues can escalate quickly, and it is important that we are ready as a country to respond to any national emergency that arises. To do this, we must prepare for all future threats, not just for pandemics.

The Covid-19 inquiry modules present a wide range of areas to assess and identify learning in order to inform the Government’s approach. This includes the impact of the pandemic on healthcare systems, patients and healthcare workers across the entire country; the development of the Covid-19 vaccine; the implementation of the vaccine rollout programme and vaccine safety; the procurement and distribution of key healthcare equipment and supplies, including PPE, ventilators and oxygen; the approach to test, trace and isolate; the impact of the pandemic on children and young people; and the economic response to the pandemic. There will be much to learn from these future modules.

It is important in all this that we recognise what more can be done to deal with health inequalities and to tackle and reduce socioeconomic health inequalities.

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, planning had a focus on clinical health inequalities rather than the broader socioeconomic inequalities. The work done on identifying and addressing clinical inequalities in pandemic planning was vital to the Covid-19 response, and the department is committed to continuing with this. However, many of these clinical inequalities—for example, for those with heart disease, diabetes et cetera—are disproportionately more prevalent in some socioeconomic groups than others, and it is accepted that there was insufficient focus on these groups in the UK’s pandemic planning.

Pandemic planning must take account of all health inequalities. They must be tackled outside of emergencies so that when a pandemic emerges, the whole population is as resilient as possible and better prepared to withstand the consequences. The need to tackle health inequalities in non-pandemic times is further necessary, given that it is impossible to predict and plan for what the unequal impact of a future pandemic might be.

It is also important to take a co-operative approach to resilience. To strengthen our national resilience in the long term, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is leading a comprehensive review of our national resilience against the full range of risks that the UK faces. He will also be chairing a dedicated Cabinet Committee on resilience to oversee that work.

Building resilience is a responsibility shared with the devolved Administrations, regional mayors, local leaders and local authorities. This is key to understanding the challenges that all parts of our society face and to delivering effective change to communities across the country. This is why the Prime Minister has already reset the relationships with these crucial partners to help achieve this. As we consider the recommendations from the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, we will work closely with all our partners to make our country safer and more secure. Resilience cannot be built through division—it will demand careful co-operation.

Following the pandemic, the previous Administration did seek to take steps to improve pandemic preparedness, including changes to how government accesses, analyses and shares data, including with the public. There was also a change to the risk assessment processes and how the centre of government prepares for and responds to crises. As a new Government, we will review these changes, because good practices need to be built on and inadequate ones changed.

The noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, proposed 10 recommendations as part of the Covid-19 Inquiry’s first report. These include improving how cross-cutting risks are managed by government and the devolved Administrations, as well as strengthening the leadership of Ministers and improving the oversight that they provide. The Government are carefully considering these recommendations and the associated findings, as well as recommendations from the Grenfell inquiry that impact on resilience planning. We will respond in full within six months, as requested by the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett.

We know that, as Covid-19 exposed, pandemics never respect borders. Outbreaks of epidemic diseases are more likely to arise in and have greater impacts in lower-resourced countries. This makes global health security a bedrock that is essential to our own domestic

health security, which is why the Government will get behind international drives to improve global health and pandemic preparedness. These international efforts will focus on strengthening health and surveillance systems, deploying resources to places in need and ensuring that the global health architecture is effective and responsive, while also ensuring there is sustained investment in research and development. For example, the UK has signed up to the 100 Days Mission, which is a global mission to have safe and effective diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccines in the first 100 days of a pandemic. Contributing to this commitment is our UK aid investment through the UK Vaccine Network, which supports the development of vaccines to prevent and respond to epidemics in low and middle-income countries. The UK certainly has a lot to offer to the world, and we should also remember that it is in our national interest to step up to the plate.

The pandemic was a tragedy. Throughout it we witnessed remarkable service and sacrifice from front-line workers, not least those in the NHS and adult social care services, taking care of the most vulnerable in society. Volunteers repeatedly put their communities ahead of themselves, and we cannot thank the British people enough for coming together in extraordinary ways amid the tragedy of the pandemic. This Government are determined to learn the lessons from the inquiry so that we are better prepared for the future. It is our responsibility to the people who we serve, and it is a responsibility that we will meet.

5.09 pm

Lord Evans of Rainow (Con): My Lords, I reflect today on the first report from the Covid-19 Inquiry—a report that is not only sobering but necessary. It marks a vital step in understanding the full impact of the pandemic on the United Kingdom and learning the lessons necessary for future crises.

I begin by expressing my gratitude to the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, and her team for their diligent and comprehensive work. The evidence presented in this report, especially from those who have suffered loss and trauma, is invaluable. Their testimonies are vital in shaping our understanding of the pandemic's impact and informing our future strategies. The report highlights the shortcomings in our pandemic preparedness and response. These failures transcended party lines; they are failures in planning, leadership, resourcing and the ability to adapt swiftly to an unprecedented situation. We must confront these failures openly and honestly, not to cast blame but to ensure that we are better equipped to protect our citizens in the future.

Preparedness is not the responsibility of any single Government or institution. It is a shared duty that extends beyond political lines and encompasses all levels of government, public institutions and international bodies. The role of the World Health Organization and Public Health England in this pandemic must be scrutinised. Were we adequately prepared to rely on their guidance? Were these organisations equipped to offer the necessary support and leadership? It is clear from the report that the advice and recommendations from these bodies was not always as robust or adaptable as the rapidly changing situation demanded. For example, Public Health England was equipped to manage only

a limited number of cases, not the extensive testing and contact tracing needed for a pandemic the scale of Covid-19. Similarly, the report cites several instances where the World Health Organization's advice either was delayed or failed to reflect the developing reality, such as its initial denial of human-to-human transmission, the delayed declaration of a global emergency and its resistance to implementing travel restrictions.

The report also highlights a critical flaw in our previous focus on pandemic preparedness, which was largely centred on influenza, as evidenced by the Exercise Cygnus framework. While this focus was, reasonably, based on the information available at the time, the Covid-19 pandemic has emphasised the need for a broader, all-hazard approach to pandemic planning that is flexible and can adapt swiftly to unforeseen challenges. We must avoid being unprepared in the future due to an overreliance on outdated models or narrow perspectives.

Given these findings, I propose several questions to the Government. What measures are being taken to ensure that our emergency planning structures are more cohesive and comprehensive, integrating the insights and needs of devolved Administrations and local government bodies? Our response must be unified, yet flexible enough to address regional and local circumstances.

Furthermore, how do the Government intend to improve co-ordination across all levels of government and civil society? The pandemic illustrated the importance of a collaborative approach, where clear communication and co-operation are paramount. Without such co-ordination, efforts will remain fragmented and less effective.

Finally, I reiterate the importance of including a broader range of perspectives in our decision-making processes. How will the Government ensure that Ministers can access a broad spectrum of advice, including dissenting and minority viewpoints, to prevent groupthink and encourage more robust decision-making? It is crucial that we create an environment where critical thinking and diverse perspectives are not just welcome but actively encouraged.

I affirm our commitment to working with the Government and all Members of this House in the national interest. We must learn from the findings of this report and the forthcoming recommendations from the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, to strengthen our nation's resilience and preparedness. Our collective responsibility is to ensure that we are better prepared for whatever challenges the future may hold. With this commitment, I hope that we can overcome the shortcomings highlighted in the report to emerge stronger and more prepared in the future.

With that in mind, I ask the Minister what measures are being taken to ensure that our emergency planning structures are more cohesive and comprehensive, integrating the insights and needs of devolved Administrations and local government bodies. How do the Government intend to improve co-ordination across all levels of Government and civil society? How will the Government ensure that Ministers can access a broad spectrum of advice, including dissenting and minority viewpoints, to prevent groupthink and encourage more robust decision-making?

5.15 pm

Baroness Tyler of Enfield (LD): My Lords, the first report of the Covid inquiry, chaired by the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, shines a harsh spotlight on the country's state of preparedness for the Covid-19 pandemic. I too pay tribute to the noble and learned Baroness and her team for the extremely thorough and forensic way in which the inquiry has conducted its work and for the clarity of its recommendations. The report indeed makes for very sombre reading.

Before turning to the report's findings and recommendations, I first remember and pay my heartfelt respects to the hundreds of thousands of people who died as a result of the pandemic. My thoughts are with the families and friends who lost loved ones in the most harrowing of circumstances. I also think of the more than 1,000 front-line health and care workers who died after contracting Covid as a direct result of their work responsibilities. They made the ultimate sacrifice in the service of others and must never be forgotten.

I will never forget the day that we found out—via a Zoom meeting, as it had been impossible to visit—that just under 30 people had died in my late mother's care home in the first few months of the pandemic. This was a direct result of the policy of rapidly discharging untested patients from nearby hospitals into care homes without adequate PPE being available or proper infection control being in place in those homes. In the first wave of the pandemic alone, there were almost 27,000 of what are called excess deaths in care homes in England and Wales compared with the previous five years—so much for the so-called protective ring cast around care homes. It is very hard not to feel that these people somehow or other were regarded as expendable.

I will not forget saying goodbye to a lifelong friend over an iPad a few days before she passed away, or my friend who had been in hospital for over six months with a very serious and complex condition—made immeasurably worse by her family not being able to visit—who, then, two days before she was due to go home for Christmas, contracted Covid and died. The suffering has been incalculable.

In summary, the report concludes that the UK Government and the devolved Administrations' systems and emergency planning preparedness, resilience and response failed because of overly complex institutions, systems and structures and a failure to learn from the past. It also found that there was too little involvement in the planning process of local bodies and officials, particularly directors of public health. It is telling that the report concluded:

"Had the UK been better prepared for and more resilient to the pandemic, some of that financial and human cost may have been avoided. Many of the very difficult decisions policy-makers had to take would have been made in a very different context".

I completely share the sentiments expressed on the day of the report's publication by the chief executive of the Health Foundation, Dame Jennifer Dixon. She pointed to

"the country's shocking lack of preparedness for the COVID-19 pandemic"

and went on to say:

"The failure of strategic planning for a major health emergency was compounded by the lack of resilience within public services. The NHS went into the pandemic struggling to keep up with

growing waiting lists, following a decade of low spending growth and chronic staff shortages ... Lack of capacity limited the NHS's ability to deal with a surge in demand, which led to too many people going without the care they needed and many died as a result. In England, support for the social care sector, which was already thread-bare, was too slow and limited, resulting in inadequate support for people using and providing care. The consequences of this were devastating".

It is a damning indictment.

As we have heard, the inquiry's report throws into stark relief how inequalities put certain communities at disproportionate risk during the pandemic and fuelled the spread of Covid-19. It showed how low-income people, disabled people and people from black and minority ethnic communities were far more likely to get infected and die from the virus. The noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, has warned that inequality is a huge risk to the whole of the UK, and she quoted the views of Professors Bambra and Marmot:

"In short, the UK entered the pandemic with its public services depleted, health improvement stalled, health inequalities increased and health among the poorest people in a state of decline".

In the light of this assessment, which I consider to be damning, what update can the Minister give me on progress against the NHS long-term plan? Can the Minister say whether the Government will be committing to a social care workforce plan to complement the NHS workforce plan?

Much has been made, rightly, of the impact of years of disinvestment—and, frankly, disinterest at times—in public health by the Government, and how directors of public health were largely sidelined in key decision-making. The stark reality is that, entering the pandemic, the UK public health system had faced severe cuts to its local authority grant of around £1 billion worth of lost funding. This meant that the UK lacked public health capacity in 2020 to respond to Covid with a co-ordinated and effective response. This was particularly problematic in terms of out-of-date PPE, a lack of testing capacity compared with other countries, and a test and trace system that failed to partner effectively with local authorities and all the local knowledge they would have brought.

I am pleased that the report recognises the importance of public health expertise in its recommendations for the creation of a UK-wide independent statutory body for civil emergency preparedness. I hope this will ensure that directors of public health are properly consulted before independent strategic advice is given to the Government.

In future pandemic planning, much more must be done to ensure that mental health is not considered an afterthought. I was struck by the briefing I received from the Royal College of Psychiatrists, which said that, to its knowledge, it was not included in pandemic preparedness exercises, including those relating specifically to flu. Thus, it did not know the extent to which mental health was considered in preparation exercises. That seems extraordinary.

The pandemic made it difficult for people with existing mental health illnesses to access the treatment they needed—meaning that more people were presenting to services at crisis point—and many others experienced mental health problems as a direct result of Covid and lockdowns. By June 2021 some 1.5 million people were

in contact with mental health services—the highest figure since records began—and, as we know, the numbers remain alarmingly high.

It has become clear that school closures during the pandemic had a profound impact on many children. For future pandemics or similar events, surely planning and guidance must be prepared for keeping schools, other educational settings, and specialist facilities such as children and adolescent mental health services open for as long as it is safe to do.

In preparing for this debate, I was reminded of the first report of the House of Lords Public Services Committee, published in November 2020, which examined the state of public services in response to the pandemic. I was lucky enough to serve on that Select Committee and it identified a number of “fundamental weaknesses” that

“must be addressed in order to make public services resilient enough to withstand future crises”.

It also identified

“the vital role of preventative services in reducing the deep ... inequalities that have been exacerbated by COVID-19”.

One of the report’s key recommendations was:

“An approach to public health that focused on preventing health inequalities over the long term would pay dividends by increasing the resilience of communities and reducing pressures on the NHS when a crisis occurs”.

Indeed, the committee heard that many deaths from Covid could have been avoided if preventive public health services had been better funded.

The evidence we received suggested that the failure in adult social care resulted from insufficient planning coupled with years of underfunding. The Nuffield Trust pointed out that although the Government’s 2016 pandemic-planning exercise, Exercise Cygnus, had

“showed that care homes and domiciliary care would be in need of significant support in a pandemic scenario, no advance arrangements were put in place to meet those needs”,

resulting in, as we have heard, people being discharged from hospital into care settings during the first lockdown without testing and adequate PPE, which led to the tragic loss of thousands of older people. All of this from the Public Services Select Committee remains highly relevant to today’s debate.

Finally, I turn to the thorny issue of Brexit. I recognise that this will always be a contested issue. I note that the inquiry heard evidence that the UK had been made more vulnerable by Brexit; 16 separate pandemic preparation projects were “stopped” or reduced as a result of officials being diverted to brace for a no-deal Brexit. Although we heard a very different story from the Ministers involved, I was struck by the evidence given by the director of emergency preparedness and health protection at the Department of Health and Social Care—an impartial civil servant—who said that pandemic planning had been deprioritised in favour of no-deal Brexit preparations. I restrict myself to saying that the coincidence of timing between Covid and Brexit could not have been worse.

So what next? The noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, made it extremely clear that she expects all the recommendations to be acted on within an agreed timescale and that she will be monitoring progress closely. I noted the statement by the Chancellor of the

Duchy of Lancaster after the report was published. A commitment was given to respond within six months. Is the Minister able to give me an assurance that we will get that government report before the end of this year?

The best way we can collectively honour the memories of all of those who died, including those working on the front line and those still living with the impact of Covid, is to ensure that next time we are far better prepared—for without any doubt there will be a next time.

5.25 pm

Lord Bilimoria (CB): My Lords, one of my favourite sayings is that good judgment comes from experience and experience comes from bad judgment. The Covid-19 inquiry, chaired by the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, found that the UK was ill-prepared and lacked resilience, having prepared for the wrong pandemic. Key findings from the external research included inadequate test, trace and isolate systems, as mentioned by the Minister, the noble Baroness, Lady Merron. The Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, admitted that the report confirmed that the UK was underprepared for the pandemic, with failures in process, planning and policy across all four nations. Jeremy Hunt, who served as Health Secretary during the early years leading to the pandemic, acknowledged the report’s sensible recommendations and admitted being part of a group-think.

I was fortunate to be able to participate in several ways during the pandemic. The first example was as chancellor of the University of Birmingham, a tenure I held from July 2014 to July 2024. When the pandemic started, we had lockdown in March. Soon after that, I was approached by Avi Lasarow, South Africa’s Honorary Consul for the Midlands and a fellow member of the Guild of Entrepreneurs, which is soon to become a livery company. He is CEO of a major testing company, Prenetics. He said, “The Premier League football season has been suspended. We have an idea that if we test the players, the coaches and everyone involved, without spectators, regularly, we will be able to resume and complete the season. The problem is that the Government are not listening. We have identified that the University of Birmingham has an expert in testing, Professor Alan McNally”—who went on to head the Nightingale labs. “If Professor McNally approves of our idea and endorses it, maybe the Government will listen”. So I made the introduction to the head of our medical school. The Government then listened, thanks to his recommendation. The Premier League season continued, being televised with no spectators. Everyone was tested on a regular basis. Anyone who tested positive was isolated and everyone else carried on and played the game. The season was completed by 1 August 2020. Other sports followed the system and throughout the whole pandemic we had the football season. I do not think many people are aware of what I have just told noble Lords. To me, it opened up the power of regular testing to pick up asymptomatic Covid cases.

I was appointed vice-president and president-elect of the Confederation of British Industry in June 2019. I was the first entrepreneur to be in that position, the

[LORD BILIMORIA]

first relatively younger president of the CBI and the first normally not grey-haired FTSE 100 chair to be president of the CBI. Little did I realise that I would be president through the biggest global crisis since the Second World War, the pandemic. I realised very soon that the CBI is wrongly described as a lobbying organisation. I have never respected that description. To me, it is about continually identifying problems, usually well before the Government are even aware of them, and then, instead of going to the Government with a begging bowl, finding and offering solutions that can be acted upon at speed: problem, solution, action. To me, that is the essence of what entrepreneurship is about.

It is also about collaboration, about government and business working closely together. The best example of that co-operation—I have to give credit to the Prime Minister at the time, Boris Johnson—was appointing Kate Bingham, now Dame Kate Bingham, to lead the vaccine task force in May 2020. With the first vaccination on 8 December 2020, the task force transformed the model of how government, industry, academia and the NHS can work collaboratively to accelerate innovation. This enabled the UK to become the first country in the world to sign an advance purchase agreement for the Pfizer-BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine.

The Government also supported the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine, developed by Oxford University in partnership with AstraZeneca, based in Cambridge, which in turn collaborated with the Serum Institute of India, owned by Cyrus and Adar Poonawalla, good friends of mine and fellow Zoroastrian Parsis. That one company, SII, produced 2 billion doses of the vaccine. This was an example of cross-border collaboration.

Also hugely impressive was dynamic regulation: regulation at speed, with the MHRA approving vaccines in months when normally it would take years. The appointment of Nadhim Zahawi as Covid Vaccine Deployment Minister was crucial. I worked closely with him and saw how effective that appointment was.

But government does not always listen, and did not always listen. I learned about cheap and fast lateral flow tests—people could test themselves with results almost instantaneously—that were being developed in the United States. In August 2020 I started bringing that to the notice of the Government. Every time I made this recommendation, here in this House or in other interactions with the Government and the NHS, I was batted away. But, of course, as an entrepreneur you never give up.

I remember very clearly on 12 November, in a virtual Sitting of the House of Lords, asking the then Health Minister, the noble Lord, Lord Bethell, about Sir John Bell, the Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford University, who had initially been against lateral flow tests but now said that they were inexpensive and easy to use and, when used systematically, could reduce transmission by 90%. I said that these tests were picking up 75% of positive cases and 95% of the most infectious cases. I asked the Minister when we could have millions of these tests deployed by the NHS, care homes, schools, universities, airports, factories, offices, workplaces, theatres and sports grounds, so that we could get our economy firing on all cylinders again.

Do noble Lords know what the reply was? The noble Lord, Lord Bethell, said:

“As ever, I am inspired by the noble Lord’s passion for this subject. He has totally won the argument in this matter, because we are putting into the field millions of tests, as he recommended and continues to champion. The pilot in Liverpool is extremely exciting, and the tests themselves are proving both easy to administer and accurate in their diagnosis. We are working on ways of using these tests in a mass testing capacity. Universities and social care are two user cases that we have prioritised, and we are looking at using the lessons of Liverpool in other areas. In all matters, we continue to be inspired by the noble Lord”.—[*Official Report*, 12/11/20; col. 1261.]

My gosh, I shall frame that.

The reality is that the Government did listen, but it took several months before free lateral flow tests were eventually made available to all businesses and citizens. In fact, they came to be used so widely that we ran out of them in December 2021 and January 2022. Between April and June 2021, Oxford University carried out a study of 200 schools, covering 200,000 pupils and 20,000 staff. Half of them followed the “bubble rule”. If your Lordships remember, at one time there were millions of schoolchildren isolating. The other half regularly used lateral flow tests, with only those who tested positive isolating and everyone else carrying on and attending school, children and staff alike. It showed that less than 2% in each of those two cohorts were infected. The difference was that the ones who used lateral flow tests did not miss out on school, whereas the others had to go out in bubbles and miss school. I put it to the Government—I wonder whether the Minister agrees—that, had the Government listened in August 2020 and acted rapidly to introduce rapid lateral flow tests, perhaps we could have avoided lockdowns 2 and 3.

What is more, the cost of providing these tests, as I will prove, would have been minuscule compared with the £400 billion that the Government spent on saving our businesses and the economy, let alone people’s mental health. As the noble Baroness, Lady Tyler, mentioned, we had children losing out on time in school, university students missing out, people missing out on operations, lives sadly lost, and waiting lists of millions that continue to this day.

As I have said, we experienced shortages of supply. The plan was to use millions of these tests. When they were rolled out, there were sceptics who said they would cause false positives. The reality was that they were sent off to laboratories to check against PCR tests and 89% came with the same positive result, so that was a false scare.

I do not think we could have avoided the first national lockdown, from 23 March to 1 June 2020. The world did not know what was going on; we were hit with a huge shock. But the second lockdown from 5 November to 2 December 2020 and the third from 6 January 2021 to 29 March 2021, I believe, could have been avoided along with all the implications that I have outlined.

What was the cost of these lateral flow tests? For the one-year period from April 2021 to April 2022, the cost was £16 billion. Now you can buy them at retail for less than £2 each. What is 2 billion tests provided at £16 billion compared with the almost £400 billion total cost of Covid-19 measures?

I will give one last example. My wife is South African; we have a home in Cape Town. Alan Winde, Premier of the Western Cape, the most successful province in South Africa, provided me with data throughout the pandemic. That data was way better than any of the data I received over here from the NHS. Why? Because they had experience of dealing with the AIDS pandemic earlier. They had some of the best epidemiologists and virologists in the world, including Professor “Slim”, Salim Abdool Karim, who has become a good friend of mine.

Top medical scientists in Britain came under fire for ignoring the expertise of these great South African scientists on the omicron variant when it was identified in November 2021. South Africa had highly sophisticated genomic surveillance capability for Covid, which is why both the omicron and beta variants were first identified in South Africa. But instead of listening to those scientists, we did not.

Angelique Coetzee, chair of the South African Medical Association, was among those who reported omicron as “very, very mild”. South Africa then angrily condemned the travel restrictions immediately slapped on it and other southern African countries. Professor Tulio de Oliveira of the Centre for Epidemic Response and Innovation said:

“The UK, after praising us for discovering the variant, then put out this absolutely stupid travel ban”.

That is how we treated this. SAGE dismissed it. When I brought this to the notice of the Health Secretary at the time, he listened to me. I said, “Please don’t be scared by omicron. It spreads like wildfire, but it does not cause deaths”. The NHS scare meant we had a go-slow in December 2021 and January 2022. Christmas was ruined for hospitality; it was completely unnecessary, and the gloomiest predictions for omicron were shown to have been wide of the mark.

To conclude on the lessons to be learned—whether on vaccines, the Premier League carrying on, lateral flow testing, omicron or not listening to experts around the world—I hope that we learn lessons from the biggest global crisis since the Second World War: the Covid-19 pandemic.

5.37 pm

The Lord Bishop of London: My Lords, I declare my interest as set out in the register. It is good to have this opportunity to speak in this debate and to acknowledge the important recommendations of this first report from the Covid inquiry. The pandemic was a seismic event for us all, and a great tragedy for many. My thoughts and prayers go to those who have lost individuals because of the pandemic. My thanks and gratitude go to those who stepped up and beyond to care for and protect us.

I want to highlight a couple of points from the report. The first is that the clearest flaw identified in the risk assessment was the underlying health of the UK population prior to 2020, as mentioned by the noble Baroness, Lady Tyler. We are all aware of the entrenching and exposing effect that the pandemic had on health inequalities. We are all aware of the impact that non-clinical factors such as housing have on our health. We are all aware of the vast difference in healthy life expectancy depending on where we live. We are all

aware that those living in more deprived areas are more clinically vulnerable on average, but spend much more time in front-line jobs.

We are an interconnected people whose health and well-being are bound up in one another’s. It is the weighty responsibility of all of us, especially in this place, to take on such an injustice with priority and focus. In the section on data, the inquiry recommends that:

“The UK government should ... commission a wider range of research projects ready to commence in the event of a future pandemic,”

including to

“identify which groups of vulnerable people are hardest hit by the pandemic and why”.

The Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice spokesman responded to the publication of this report by saying that we must

“challenge, address and improve inequalities”

and not just understand

“the effects of these failures”.

In fact, I wonder whether we have really and completely understood the impact. We were all affected, but we were not equally affected. At the height of the virus, the Bangladeshi population had a death rate around five times higher than the white British population. The rate in the Pakistani population was around three times higher and in the black African population it was twice as high. But even these statistics do not communicate the extent of the damage that the virus caused to specific communities. Between March 2020 and February 2021, the Church End area in Brent lost 48 people. The damage done to individual communities was, in some cases, very severe. What action are the Government taking to address the widening health inequalities in our communities, not just for future pandemics but for now?

There are questions I believe we need to ask about how these devastating events have impacted the trust that those communities have in the health service, local government services and the Government. In 2021, I did a piece of work examining the role that faith communities played during the pandemic and heard their stories and experiences. Many shared stories of loss and resourcefulness, but they also shared stories of culturally incompetent care. This included the story of a Sikh man in Southall, who had had a stroke and was unable to speak, who had his moustache and beard cut without obtaining the permission or seeking the consent of his family. This was deeply offensive and after investigation it was found there was no medical reason for it to have occurred. We heard stories of distrust of the health service and a lack of understanding from statutory bodies of the provision for their communities that faith groups had held for generations. They said:

“There was a lack of cultural knowledge about how a burial for the Muslim community happens so we did it ourselves. We raised money so people could die with dignity”.

During the pandemic, faith leaders were rightly identified as important partners, and there are fantastic accounts of successful vaccination rollouts and health campaigns supported by them. However, that engagement has not been sustained. Forming relationships in a moment of crisis is not the way that resilient and

[THE LORD BISHOP OF LONDON]

interconnected communities are built. I have said many times in this place that, if we are to make a serious and sustained effort to tackle health inequalities, faith groups must be involved. I was encouraged to hear the words of the noble Lord, Lord Evans, about including diverse views, which I would see as also including faith groups.

Areas of high deprivation often have a higher level of faith observance. A person's faith is also significant to their healthcare needs. Because of these things, systematic engagement with faith communities at a local, regional and strategic level is vital. This both ensures that the PLUS target populations are prioritised and makes sure that appropriate healthcare is offered to those with faith-based requirements. In addition, the extraordinary effort that faith groups gave to supporting their communities during the pandemic and continue to give should be recognised for the benefit not just to their communities but to us all. What progress are the Government making to engage with faith groups not just in the moment of crisis but over the long term?

This report should inform not just the earmarked actions that we take to prepare for the next pandemic but our approach to other areas of life and health. Our collective health will be undermined if these entrenched inequalities persist and will make us all the more vulnerable to future health threats. I urge the Government to consider carefully how they respond to this report to improve the health of those communities which bore the brunt of the Covid-19 pandemic and to undertake a serious reform of social care. This has never been more urgent.

5.45 pm

Baroness Thornton (Lab): My Lords, I was keen to participate in this debate today because I was the shadow Health Minister in your Lordships' House during the pandemic and for many of the years leading up to it. I thank my noble friend Lady Merron for the opportunity for this debate and for her brilliant introduction to it. I would just like to point out this is the first module of many—we are at the beginning of a process, not at the end of it.

I have been following the work of the commission of the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, since it started because I believe that this level and depth of inquiry is essential. As my noble friend said, not least we owe this to the tens of thousands who died, the thousands who suffer still the effects of long Covid and those who have yet to recover from the trauma that they experienced either while working in our emergency services in the NHS or in witnessing deaths and illness in their families or, indeed, their patients.

As Sir David Spiegelhalter said:

"The 2017 National Risk Register did include an 'emerging infectious disease' such as SARS and MERS, but the 'reasonable worst case scenario' was only 'several thousand people experiencing symptoms, potentially leading to up to 100 fatalities'. This was the underestimate of the century – by the end of 2023, over 230,000 people in the UK had died with 'Covid-19' on their death certificate".

I want to make two reflections today about this report, but I particularly welcome recommendation 10 in this module, which calls for:

"A UK-wide independent statutory body for whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience"

to be set up within 12 months, which would consult with the

"voluntary, community and social enterprise sector".

As patron of Social Enterprise UK and founder of its all-party group and having worked and supported the voluntary sector for most of my working life, I think this is very important. With particular reference to the questions raised by the RNIB in its very helpful briefing, I ask my noble friend the Minister to provide us with an update on the Government's plans for setting up such a body and the ways in which disabled people and other groups could be represented. A letter would certainly suffice to answer that question.

The first issue I particularly want to mention and to perhaps explore is how to avoid groupthink, as the noble Lord, Lord Evans, said. If I might interject a moment of political dissent into this, I was waiting for him to say that they got it wrong with that at some point in his remarks. I will just leave it at that, because his Government were in charge of what happened next. The report says that:

"The provision of advice ... could be improved. Advisers and advisory groups did not have sufficient freedom and autonomy to express dissenting views and suffered from a lack of significant external oversight and challenge. The advice was often undermined by 'groupthink'",

which, of course, added to the lack of preparedness. Vital "what if?" questions were not asked, either in the flawed pandemic preparations prior to the pandemic or during the engagement in dealing with the pandemic in those vital early days.

That means that questions of the preparedness did not take account of health inequalities, or of on-the-ground issues such as care homes and local preparedness. I saw this in action myself, because I was a member of a local clinical commissioning group in my borough that was about to be abolished at the beginning of 2020. At our last meeting that March, our local GPs assumed that they would have a vital role to play with the public health teams in our area in dealing with what was clearly shaping up to be a serious infectious disease. However, there was no information flowing from the centre about step-down facilities for those who needed to be moved out of hospitals—because everybody recognised that people needed to be moved out of them—and all those present knew that they should not be placed in care homes immediately. No questions were being asked, and our public health experts were not being listened to. There was no collecting of data locally and no flow of information, so a serious lack of leadership happened at that time.

The background to this was that the committee that might have led on these matters—the threats, hazards, resilience and contingencies sub-committee—had last met in February 2017. In July 2019, the sub-committee was formally taken out of the committee structure, with the suggestion that it could be "reconvened if needed" but an acceptance that in fact it was abolished. As a result, immediately prior to the pandemic, there was no cross-government ministerial oversight of the matters that were previously within that sub-committee's remit. I say to my noble friend that the need to challenge groupthink means that there have to be external

voices and expertise in our pandemic preparedness. Can I be assured that that will happen and that there will be a commitment to partnership working with scientists, researchers and vaccine manufacturers to ensure future pandemic resilience?

My second reflection is about parliamentary and constitutional readiness for national emergencies. In many ways, this is covered in the first recommendation of the report, which is a

“radical simplification of the civil emergency preparedness and resilience systems”

and

“rationalising and streamlining the current bureaucracy and providing better and simpler Ministerial and official structures and leadership”.

Since the report was commissioned, there has in fact been an Independent Commission on UK Public Health Emergency Powers, chaired by the right honourable Sir Jack Beatson. The commission reviewed the UK’s public health legislative framework and institutional arrangements. Several Members of your Lordships’ House, including myself, gave evidence to that commission about what actually happened on the ground in terms of parliamentary accountability and governance. How do we build into our resilience structure our need for accountability, transparency and parliamentary control of executive action? That was what the independent commission was talking about; I am sure that its evidence has gone into the public commission, but it explored those issues.

When we build our new resilience framework, it has to take account of the role of Parliament and what happened. I think the then Minister and I were in agreement, along with lots of other noble Lords, that it was completely unacceptable that we were having to deal with decisions two or three weeks after they had been taken, or even longer. This Parliament found itself in a ridiculous situation, so we need to build into our new plans that that should not happen. One way might be that if we are faced with a national emergency, there should be a national political response that the Government have to lead and that takes account of all the different political voices that should be heard in that process.

I have been dismayed that some parts of the press and others have denigrated the inquiry as a waste of time and money, or as some form of petty personality dispute. We have lived through the worst disaster of our recent history, with upward of 230,000 deaths, as I have said, making us one of the most badly affected western nations. In terms of responsible governance, if we had lost that number of people in, say, a tsunami, we would have a huge inquiry to investigate all the nuts and bolts of future mitigation and best practice. Why would we not do the same in the event of the likelihood of another viral pandemic? Such events, stress-testing the machinery of our democracies to the maximum, seem to be part of this process.

I again congratulate my noble friend Lady Merron and look forward to many more discussions about future modules.

5.55 pm

Lord Lansley (Con): My Lords, I am very pleased to contribute to this debate and to follow the noble Baroness, Lady Thornton. One should never underestimate the

importance of the Official Opposition in securing the role of good government. I am slightly hoping that the noble Baroness, Lady Merron, will recall that I was the shadow Secretary of State for Health when she was Minister of State for Public Health during the swine flu pandemic. I give credit to her and to the then Secretary of State, Andy Burnham—and indeed to Alan Johnson previously—because they were always very open. She will know that it was one of the things I was very interested in before the 2010 election. I asked specifically for an evaluation by the Health Protection Agency of the containment phase of the response to the swine flu pandemic. Although people might imagine that we did not do this, we were looking carefully at what the potential for containment of an influenza epidemic looked like and how we might do more in that respect.

I should declare an interest: I was Secretary of State between 2010 and 2012. In that context I was, strictly speaking, the author of the 2011 pandemic influenza preparedness plan. I am not going to go on at length about it, but I have my personal criticisms of the way the inquiry has been conducted, which I hope can be remedied in part by the government response which the Minister said will be coming in the months ahead. It is very important for the Government to ensure that any flaws in the inquiry report are themselves challenged, because the inquiry may have been prone to groupthink as well, by imagining that there were certain conclusions that it was bound to reach and then aiming for them.

My problem with the process is that, as a number of noble Lords have said, there is criticism of flaws in the 2011 preparedness plan. The inquiry did not ask me for evidence. It did not invite me to give oral evidence or ask me for written evidence. Notwithstanding that, it then chose to send me a rule 13 letter, making what were not specific individual criticisms but generalised criticisms of Secretaries of State over a period that included me. I then had three weeks in which to send it what were pages and pages of corrections, some of which it took on board, and others it did not. Although I will not go through them in detail, there are things the report says about the period running up to the 2011 pandemic influenza preparedness plan and the use of it which are absolutely wrong. It is not fair for it to say that we should have looked at other emerging infectious diseases in the same way that we looked at avian influenza.

I was responding, and I knew it, to the national risk register. It said that H5N1 was going to have a very high mortality rate when it was transmitted to humans, and therefore was immensely dangerous. If it were to mutate to the point at which it would be readily transmissible between people, we would be facing a pandemic on at least the scale of Spanish flu. I was very focused on that, because that is what the risk assessments told me to do. Let us not leave aside the central importance of looking at risk and understanding the various components of the risks that we face. To be fair, the national risk register and the risk assessments took account of other emerging infectious diseases—hence the establishment of NERVTAG.

We should be much more aware of the risk of the next pandemic—we may be in it. The scale of the impact of antimicrobial resistance on global population

[LORD LANSLEY]

and mortality could potentially be worse than the Covid-19 pandemic. We know that many emerging infectious diseases are zoonoses, and we may see in them characteristics that we do not recognise from either influenza or coronaviruses; it may be something completely different, and the vectors of transmission may be completely different.

I do not want to go on about it at length, but I want to talk about the idea that, in 2011, we should have had a pandemic plan that looked at other potential pandemics. It would not have changed the outcome in 2020. Why? Because when you look at the 2011 pandemic preparedness plan, you find that many of the potential countermeasures were either not considered or the evidence base we were presented with and on which Ministers were working said that they would not work.

The evidence base said that respirators and face masks were right for preventing transmission by a person but that they were probably not going to be effective in the population as a whole. We may now conclude that that was wrong, but that was the advice we were given at the time. The advice given at the time was that school closure should have been a limited measure, devoted to specific high-impact areas and events. That may have been wrong, but it was the advice given at the time. The advice given at the time was that we stood no chance of containing a pandemic by controlling access to airports.

If somebody had come along, by some mystery, and told us in 2011 that we were going to be presented with a coronavirus pandemic of the scale that we subsequently encountered, many of the measures that we deployed—including lockdowns, which were not recommended in relation to pandemic influenza—would not have been recommended. The pandemic plan may have been a pandemic plan for some other virus, but it would not necessarily have been any different from that which was prepared for pandemic influenza.

Therefore, there are two key points when it comes to what our preparedness should look like. The first is understanding at the earliest possible moment what a new virus or infectious disease actually looks like. How is it transmitted and by what means? What is the incubation period? What are the clinical characteristics? In 2011, the idea that we could be presented with something with a long incubation period and asymptomatic transmission was not contemplated, and so the idea that in 2011 we would have understood this and prepared for it is fanciful.

The point that the inquiry looks at but does not really focus on is the second key part of preparedness: making the country resilient by making people and our public health system more resilient. I put in parentheses that the public health White Paper of December 2010, establishing Public Health England, did so on the basis that its budget would increase at the same rate as the NHS budget. In 2015, this was trashed by the Treasury. Unfortunately, I think Secretary of State Hunt let that happen. You can look at the evidence to the inquiry from Duncan Selbie, former chief executive of Public Health England, to see the serious adverse consequences that resulted from the £200 million cut in that year and in subsequent years to the public health budget.

Not only that, but we must understand that, around the world, some populations were more resilient because they were less unequal. Equality matters. The coalition Government had this as an explicit objective of our policy, and I personally very much subscribe to it. Our public health needs us to be much more equal and for disadvantage to be actively challenged. That is why I supported Michael Marmot in the latter part of his further inquiries.

I encourage the Minister, in the work that will be done in government, not simply to respond to this module—and, as the noble Baroness, Lady Thornton, rightly said, to later modules—with what the present Labour Administration think or thought at the time but to challenge some of the things that the inquiry says if it is conducting itself on a basis which is not a reasonable one for us to have worked on in the past. To make conclusions that are unjustified seems to be a bad way of reviewing the evidence and thinking for the future.

Finally, when the inquiry moves on to later stages, I hope it will return to the question of what was done in 2016 on Exercise Cygnus and after it. If we are going to do better in future, having plans is critical. As von Clausewitz would have said, having plans will never stand contact with reality but having no plan gets you nowhere. It is important to have plans and to expose those plans to serious scrutiny, including by Ministers, as well as officials, and to follow up on those plans.

Everything tells me that the 2011 preparedness plan was not the problem. The problem, as Sally Davies said in evidence to the inquiry, was that it was not reviewed, updated and properly looked at in 2016 as it should have been. After Exercise Cygnus, there should have been a new and additional preparedness plan related to what we had then understood to be different threats from MERS and SARS. That did not happen. The follow-up to Exercise Cygnus did not happen as it should have. Having these exercises, preparing the scenarios and following up on them is absolutely critical to our overall preparedness, as is reforming our ability to influence the public health of this country.

6.07 pm

Lord Harris of Haringey (Lab): My Lords, I am delighted that the Government have found time for us to debate this very important first report from the Covid-19 inquiry chaired by the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett.

I chair the National Preparedness Commission. This was conceived before Covid struck. Its gestation was dominated by national lockdowns, physical distancing and mask wearing—all overshadowed by nearly 250,000 Covid-related deaths, to say nothing of the toll on physical and mental health across the population.

The report from the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, necessarily focuses on national pandemic preparedness, but what her report says has a much wider salience. She reminds us that:

“The primary duty of the state is to protect its citizens from harm. It is, therefore, the state’s duty to ensure that the UK is as properly prepared to meet threats from a lethal disease as it is from a hostile force. Both are threats to national security.

That same point applies to most of the other 89 acute risks in the national risk register and the other slow-burn chronic risks that are considered separately by government.

The noble and learned Baroness concludes that there must be “radical reform” as the existing arrangements and structures failed. Her indictment is harsh: the UK was too complacent about its strength in pandemic preparedness. It was boosterism: we were the best in the world, or the second best in the world. We had plans and protocols, but that is not the same as having working systems, particularly if those plans are untested, outdated and over-specific to the wrong kind of pandemic. She says that there was a failure to appreciate long-term risks and an inadequate assessment of cascade and compound risks. Improvements in resilience arising, for example, from previous exercises, were routinely deprioritised. There was a poor use of experts and, in particular, no mechanism for challenging assumptions.

The report draws an important distinction between whole-system preparedness and preparedness for single-domain risks. There are linked and compounding risks that require a cross-government approach. What we need is much stronger systems thinking within government. Departments need to think beyond their own responsibilities and the centre of government must take a grip on the complex nature and interconnectedness of so many of the hazards that we face. But that will only tell us what we face; even more important is that the nation’s resilience and its preparedness to respond to all these different hazards must become a much higher priority.

A resilient and secure nation is the necessary foundation on which all the Government’s missions must be based. To govern is to choose. However, some duties of government are of overriding priority: safeguarding the nation and protecting our citizens from harm. The reality is that those duties must override, where necessary, other shorter-term political choices and objectives. Yet there are practical and institutional biases that have made it difficult for preparedness and resilience to be prioritised, particularly when alternative actions are more visible, provide more immediate gratification and are superficially more crowd-pleasing.

When things go wrong—and I say this to my noble friends who are current Ministers, just as I would say it to those who were Ministers in the past or hope to be Ministers in future—the subsequent inquiries, such as this one or tomorrow’s into the Grenfell fire, always ask what went wrong or why it was not prevented. Looking again at Ministers and former Ministers, I ask: why did those with responsibility not regard the risks as important or pressing enough? Why did they not have the information they needed—or did they fail to ask? Worse still, did they not want to know?

It is not easy for decision-makers, Ministers and civil servants, who have to balance their immediate priorities against longer-term preparations to deal with what is frankly unpredictable and uncertain. There is, of course, the prevention paradox: the more successfully risks are prevented, or handled if they happen, the less people notice. We live in a democracy. We all find it difficult to respond to novel risks, or to protracted and complex challenges. There is an optimism bias and groupthink, as has been referred to several times today, as well as confirmation bias. We should never forget that unlikely events happen and the cost of putting things right is several orders of magnitude greater than earlier preventive action.

Proper resilience and preparedness are likely to be expensive. It will usually be impossible to prove that the actions taken have prevented something or will do so, particularly if that hypothetical event is at some indeterminate time in the future and long after the decision-maker’s term of office is forgotten. But it is still necessary. As a nation, we have been poor at long-term planning to mitigate threats.

So what would make a difference? I have already mentioned systems thinking, but we also need much better horizon scanning and foresight. There needs to be more diversity of thought, a point picked up by several noble Lords—again, recognised in the inquiry—and there is a need for much more external to government advice. I suspect that we also need to have new ways of accounting and valuing resilience and preparedness expenditure. Treasury Green Book rules should be adjusted to ensure that long-term requirements for preparedness and resilience are given due weight rather than being discounted out of the picture.

We also need to change the wiring at the centre of government. The noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, suggests a single Cabinet-level committee responsible for whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience, and she quotes a former Prime Minister, the noble Lord, Lord Cameron, as saying that this needs to be led by a strong Cabinet Minister with the

“ear of the Prime Minister”

so that there is

“the full weight of government behind their decisions”.

That political leadership is vital, but we also need the Civil Service support structures to be in place, perhaps with a new Permanent Secretary for preparedness and resilience, effectively the nation’s chief resilience and risk officer, whose task would be to ensure that issues are pursued systematically and across government. We also need a robust system of parliamentary oversight, as my noble friend has already said.

Then we come to what the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, described at the report launch as her most important recommendation, which was

“a statutory independent body for whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience”

to provide independent strategic advice, consult widely, especially with the voluntary and community sectors, assess the state of planning for preparedness and resilience, and make recommendations. It would be a sort of Climate Change Committee on steroids. I know that some people perhaps do not like the idea of a Climate Change Committee on steroids, but for national preparedness and resilience it is essential.

I would go further and suggest that we need a national resilience Act, again perhaps modelled on the Climate Change Act, placing a legal duty on government departments and public bodies to take account of and prioritise the need for preparedness and resilience in all their actions, requiring government to report on baseline resilience, setting targets for improvements needed and reporting annually on progress. The compelling reason for investing in resilience and preparedness is safeguarding the world that our children and grandchildren will inherit. What the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, has proposed in her report,

[LORD HARRIS OF HARINGEY]

perhaps along with a national resilience Act, is a necessary condition for a system that encourages and supports preparedness and resilience.

Ultimately, society as a whole must be behind the change of approach needed. That will require mature political leadership and I am confident that we have that. We live in an increasingly turbulent and uncertain world; we must be prepared for whatever may arise. Every part of society and every part of government needs to be prepared and resilient, with a whole-of-society approach and a whole-of-government approach. I hope that when my noble friend responds she will promise precisely that because, if we fail to invest adequately in preparedness and resilience and if we fail to adapt appropriately for the long-term challenges of the future, that will have been a grotesque abnegation of our obligations to our children and future generations. We must not let it happen.

6.18 pm

Lord Frost (Con): My Lords, I am glad that we have the chance to debate this first inquiry report, because there is a lot to say. We all have our own experience of the pandemic, and we have heard some earlier. My own experience is bracketed by two events. It was bracketed at the end by my own resignation from government. I think I am the only person in HM Government, either a Minister or official, to have stepped down in protest at pandemic handling, specifically against vaccine passports and the prospect of a further lockdown in December 2021. At the beginning, it was bracketed by having watched the near-collapse of the government machine in Downing Street in early 2020.

In my view, there has been much largely unreasonable vilification of Ministers' and officials' behaviour over the pandemic period and I want to put on record that personally I cannot forget the courage of those who turned up to work in those difficult days, believing at that time that they were risking serious illness or even death. Those people deserve commendation for doing everything that they could at that point to live up to their responsibility to the nation and keep the Government going.

Between those two points, while I was trying to run a trade negotiation, I saw a lot of the decision-making on the pandemic. I have not been asked about any of this by the inquiry; so be it. Like others, I am not particularly impressed by what I have seen of the workings of the inquiry so far, and I cannot share the warm words that I have heard earlier today. The inquiry's conduct so far seems to have lacked something, both in seriousness and in real intellectual curiosity about the pandemic. I hope I am proved wrong as subsequent reports emerge, but I fear that this one rather bears out my concerns and I want to begin by saying why.

First, there is something unsatisfactory about producing a series of, in effect, interim reports rather than an overall judgment. Inevitably, the early reports will beg lots of questions. It is, after all, difficult to judge the first report without a clear understanding of what the inquiry's view is on other important questions: the effectiveness of decision-making; the effect on the health service; the impact on the economy, and so on.

Indeed, it is not even clear to me that we are going to get from the inquiry what we really need—a report on the costs and benefits of measures taken, factoring in the economic and social costs—and if the inquiry does not produce it, then the Government must.

Meanwhile, what we have is a report that tells us that much went wrong in pandemic preparation. Of course, the inquiry can reasonably reach that conclusion only if it is confident that deaths in the pandemic were worse than they might have been with better preparation. The report does not actually tell us that; it just assumes it. Perhaps the evidence will come later, in the future reports, but meanwhile we have the conclusions without any of the workings, and I find that methodologically quite unsatisfactory.

Let me turn to some of the conclusions and recommendations. I am going to be quite critical, but I want to begin with one important and positive aspect of the report: its criticism of groupthink and its recommendation about “red teams” in government. Groupthink was, as noble Lords have said, very obvious in some of these decisions. It is easier said than done to make red teams really effective, but I hope that new Ministers will take this recommendation seriously, and perhaps not only in this area of policy.

I have three concerns about the report's conclusions and recommendations. The first, which has been touched on already, is its heavily reported conclusion that:

“The UK prepared for the wrong pandemic”.

The report uses those words in its executive summary but never repeats them in the main text, which makes one suspicious, of course, that they are there for popular consumption and not actual analysis. To my mind, and I am not the only one—I share my noble friend Lord Lansley's reservations on this point—the report never makes clear why the inquiry has said this. It is certainly not obvious to me. After all, the 2011 strategy was expressly designed to address all respiratory viruses, and WHO advice from even this year says that Covid and flu

“spread in similar ways ... Many risk factors for severe disease are common to both ... Many of the same protective measures are effective against COVID-19 and influenza”.

So it is not clear why flu is in any way a bad proxy for the pandemic that we had.

To the extent that one can assess what is meant from the report's verbiage, it is possible that what the inquiry means to say is that the Government were wrong to prepare for a pandemic of which the spread could only be mitigated and not contained or prevented. But the spread was not in the end contained or prevented, so it is still not obvious why the 2011 strategy was, in the inquiry's view, such a poor one. Understanding this properly is crucial to future planning, and I am afraid that I do not think we do understand it properly on the basis of the report.

My second concern is about the recommendations for structural change. It is undoubtedly true, I fear, that, as the report says, Ministers and officials failed to learn from planning exercises or to implement their conclusions. I am afraid that is just normal life in Whitehall—a standard cultural feature and one we had to fight very hard to overcome when we were planning for a no-deal Brexit. But, of course, you cannot generally change the culture by just changing the structures.

That is why I find it surprising that the inquiry focused so much on this in its proposal to scrap the lead department model and move responsibility to the Cabinet Office, a department widely recognised, I think, to be one of the least effective in government. I can see how people with little experience in public administration, such as most of those staffing the inquiry, might think that issues involving many government departments should be managed from the centre, but, after all, everything in government is cross-government, and not everything can be run from 70 Whitehall. I fear that the consequence of this recommendation will be to disempower departments which really have the expertise and the resources while producing no extra coherence or direction, only duplication.

For similar reasons, I also have concerns about the proposed independent statutory body that is recommended in paragraph 6.93. It is obvious that responsible Ministers need a good mechanism for consulting and remaining in touch with a wide range of experience in pandemic management—and, I would add, outside this country as well as within it—but I fear that the effect of creating what is, in effect, just another quango will in practice be to remove planning from politics altogether. We will have the same situation that we have in many areas now, when a quango makes recommendations which are just disconnected from the real choices that actual Governments have to make—choices about trade-offs on risks, about costs, about resource constraints—and yet Ministers end up by having no real choice but to accept those recommendations or be accused of overruling technical advice for political reasons. That is not satisfactory and will not help us get things right in future.

My third comment is on something the report does not say explicitly but which is quite obvious from reading it and certainly obvious to those of us who lived through it in government. That is that one major reason for complexity, duplication and uncertainty in the pandemic response was the complicating role of the devolved Governments. I doubt very much that anyone thought, back in 1998 when we created the devolved Administrations, that the devolution of public health as a competence would have the end result of travel bans between England and Wales, or Scotland operating, in effect, its own and different entry control system to third countries during the pandemic. The report hints at this problem by proposing that the new quango that I just mentioned should have “a UK-wide remit”. It understandably refrains from going into detail about why. I am not quite so constrained, and I think that proper management of public health in emergency conditions requires decisions to be taken at a national level for the whole country, that the Government should have brought in legislation to that effect in 2020 and that it should be made possible in future as soon as we can.

I want to draw one broader conclusion. It is my concern that this report falls into the trap that so many inquiries fall into of believing that cleverer people, more information, more preparation, better planning, if done properly and rigorously, can solve problems; and that if those problems are not solved, that is, ipso facto, evidence of poor preparation. The report recommends, for example—some might think ambitiously—that:

“It should be a fundamental aspect of all risk assessment that the potential impacts on society and the economy are taken into account”.

You do not have to be a complete devotee of Hayek’s explanation of the knowledge problem to think it unlikely that even the most efficient Government are going to be able to foresee and respond to all “impacts on society and the economy”; there are limits to what planning can do.

Of course, we should do the best possible, but what is also needed is something else: an adaptive and a learning Government, one who can assimilate information, draw conclusions and alter course in the light of real-time developments. Unfortunately, we did not have that during the pandemic. Instead, I am afraid we had a culture of compliance and denial, making it impossible to learn from experience. When it decided to lock down in spring 2020, the machine kept doing the same thing on autopilot. It was not just unable to assess the trade-offs between lockdowns and the economy; it was unable to assess, assimilate and explain basic facts such as the fatality rate, the effectiveness of vaccines, their effect on transmission, the effect or lack of it of vaccine passports, the effectiveness of facemasks and much more. Above all, it failed to draw conclusions from the evidence and adjust its approach. Instead, until the whole Covid world collapsed in January 2022, the first and last recourse was always to lockdowns, like a brain-dead animal still moving with instinct as if it were still alive and thinking.

The Minister said in introducing this debate that the intention in future is to create a learning system which can respond. But unless you change the wider culture in society, that will be quite tricky. Plenty of individuals at the time resisted exactly that learning. The then responsible Ministers are some of them, but they were not the only ones. Most of civil society, trade unions and faith groups—including the Church of England—all pushed for the most risk-averse policies possible. All other political parties pressed for more and tougher lockdowns, more working from home, more public money and more debt. To take just one example, the current Prime Minister said in July 2021:

“Lifting all restrictions at once is reckless—and doing so when the Johnson variant”—

let us not forget that shameful use of language—

“is already out of control risks a summer of chaos”,

with “deadly consequences”. It never happened. Not for the first time, and probably not for the last, he turned out to be talking nonsense.

But others advising the Government at the time must also take responsibility. The second lockdown was publicly justified through figures and charts which were simply wrong when presented and shown to be so immediately afterwards. They never learned. Even as late as December 2021, these advisers were predicting disaster. The then Chief Medical Officer said on 16 December that large numbers of Covid patients ending up in hospital was a “nailed-on prospect” and that the UK was facing “a really serious threat”. The then and current head of the UK Health Security Agency said that omicron represented

“probably the most significant threat we’ve had since the start of the pandemic”.

[LORD FROST]

Anyone who looked at the data from South Africa, as has been said, knew that these statements were wrong. We certainly know it now.

This behaviour could persist because there simply was no free political debate about these issues. Many Governments leaned on social media and tried to terrify citizens into losing their faculties in support of their approaches. We were not allowed to discuss obvious things such as the plausibility that the virus emerged from a lab in China. We learned what happened from the Twitter files and from Mark Zuckerberg's letter of 26 August to the House Judiciary Committee in the US, which said that

"the Biden administration, including the White House, repeatedly pressured our teams for months to censor certain Covid-19 content ... I regret that we were not more outspoken about it. I also think we made some choices that, with the benefit of hindsight and new information, we wouldn't make today".

As I keep saying, most disinformation and misinformation comes from Governments. That culture was set during the pandemic, and it needs to change.

That is why it is so important not just to avoid groupthink in government but to promote free debate more broadly. We in this country, in particular the Conservative Party, can be proud that in the end we broke through that cycle of risk-averse controls and repression. Debate in this Parliament could not in the end be stifled. We should be glad that Boris Johnson in the end reached his own judgment about lockdowns and refused to go with the flow. That decision broke the spell and the cycle of lockdowns. It showed the rest of the world that the control and prevention approach was fundamentally misconceived and that it would have been better to stick to the 2011 plan so criticised in this report. It showed that it was not necessary to keep repeating the same actions, expecting a different result. But by then the damage had been done. One thing that is surely clear, even from this quite unsatisfactory first inquiry report, is that we must never repeat it.

6.33 pm

Lord Reid of Cardowan (Lab): My Lords, unusually, I will not attempt a critical analysis of the last Government's conduct of Covid. That is not due to a sudden surge of empathy; it is sufficient to describe the report, the subject of today's debate, which is critical enough.

I welcome the Minister's mention of mpox—I think she was the only one to mention it—because this report could not be more timely. If we needed any evidence of its relevance, it has surely come with the recent World Health Organization warning about the spread of mpox. Last month, it declared the ongoing outbreaks in Africa a global emergency, hoping to spur a robust global response to that crisis. Hope springs extreme in that case, because we will be and have been assured by everyone that mpox can be safely contained. However, the truth is that, to date, Africa has received a tiny fraction of the vaccines needed to slow its speed, especially in the Congo, where more than 18,000 suspected cases and 629 deaths have already occurred as of last week. It is surely not just a moral compulsion to make sure that that situation is remedied and contained, but dramatically in our self-interest.

Quite apart from mpox, as the Minister said, it is a matter of not just if but when we will be faced with another global pandemic. The nature of modern demographics, population growth, travel and legal and illegal migration all make that highly probable, if not inevitable. Faced with this prospect, the report makes sombre reading. Sadly, it highlights that, despite previous experiences with epidemics such as SARS, H1N1, CoV and swine flu, the UK's preparedness for a pandemic of Covid-19's magnitude was by any standards inadequate. The report exposes several critical areas where the UK fell short, offering a stark reflection of what needs to be improved.

We do not need reminding of the terrible cost of the Covid-19 pandemic: over 200,000 lives lost, countless families affected and widespread disruption to our daily lives, economy and mental health. The inquiry has sought to capture that reality not only to honour the friends and family we have lost but to ensure that their experiences inform future actions. It is true that the report concentrated on preparations. Some noble Lords have criticised that. Funnily enough, the objective of the first section of the report was to study preparations. We should not criticise people for addressing the very subject of the report as it was laid out. Of course there were serious economic implications. The UK's economic preparedness was tested as businesses closed and unemployment soared. The inquiry recommends robust economic contingency planning—as my noble friend Lord Harris mentioned, this is essential—including support for businesses and workers, to cushion the blow of such crises in future.

One of the inquiry's primary areas of focus is the Government's response in the early days of the pandemic. I am very glad of the honesty with which the noble Lord, Lord Frost, addressed us this evening; I do not know if he said the word "shambles", but that is certainly the picture he depicted. The report highlights significant delays in imposing lockdown measures and implementing appropriate testing and tracing systems. It is very easy to say that no one knew. There is an old saying: you do not need to look in the crystal ball—read the history books. In this case, that is *Hansard*. Read what the noble Lord, Lord Patel, asked in a PNQ in February 2020. He could see what was coming, so the question of why the Government could not naturally arises. It is imperative not to criticise what the Government did but to learn from their mistakes. A rapid response to future health crises is not just advisable but essential. Preparedness must become a priority on our national agenda, involving not only the Government but local authorities, public health agencies and communities.

Moreover, the report emphasises the critical role of communication during the pandemic. The initial confusion surrounding guidance and protocols led to a mixed reaction from the public. Clear and transparent communication should have fostered greater understanding, compliance and trust. As we strive to improve our public health response, we need to commit to maintaining open lines of communication, using clear language and engaging communities from the outset. Transparency, especially in times of crisis, is key to building that essential trust.

Another perhaps more poignant lesson from the inquiry is the highlight on inequalities within our society that the pandemic laid bare. The report illustrates how marginalised communities bore the brunt of the

health crisis, facing high infection rates, poorer health outcomes and greater economic hardship. Women, ethnic minorities and low-income workers were disproportionately affected. Surely that should serve as a wake-up call for all of us. In rebuilding and restructuring our health systems, we need to ensure that equity is at the forefront. We must strive for policies that address these disparities, ensuring that everyone, regardless of background and circumstance, has access to healthcare, support and resources.

The findings in the report also draw attention to the crucial role of our healthcare workers, who faced extraordinary challenges on the front lines. One previous speaker mentioned the bravery and courage of those who went into Downing Street, risking the chance of catching Covid—though as far as I can remember, they spent a lot of time in the open air, in the garden—but the workers in the National Health Service faced that every single day. Their sacrifices and dedication cannot be overstated and the inquiry emphasises the need to better support our healthcare workforce through adequate resources, mental health services and fair compensation. We must prioritise their well-being, recognising that their health is intrinsically linked to the efficacy of our health system as a whole.

Furthermore, the report underscores the importance of data, which was mentioned by the noble Lord, Lord Bilimoria, who unfortunately is not in his place at the moment. Accurate and timely data collection was essential for tracking the virus's spread and effectively responding to it. The inquiry highlights the need to enhance our data systems to facilitate informed decision-making and responsiveness in future pandemics. That includes not only health data but also socioeconomic data to understand the broader impacts of such a crisis on society.

All in all, this report represents, in my view, a thorough examination of our national response to the Covid pandemic, and one which we should very much bear in mind when the Government come to propose future planning. Of course, this may involve legislative measures. Yesterday evening, I received a communication from the Bingham Centre. It is not an institution I know and it is not an unfamiliar experience for noble Lords to receive and be inundated with emails the night before a debate—but its advice seems to me to be sound.

The Bingham Centre has suggested that among the considerations for that approach to legislation should be four factors. First, the four legislatures of the UK should be involved in government planning exercises for future public health emergencies—a point mentioned by the noble Lord, Lord Frost, about the apparent discrepancy and incongruity between the approaches of the four legislatures in the United Kingdom. It suggests that if a draft Bill is designed in anticipation of a public health emergency, it should be drafted only after the widest practicable stakeholder consultation and engagement, and that government should consider as an integral part of policy planning which public health interventions should be given a legal basis, which should only take the form of public health advice and how that distinction can be best communicated—unlike at the beginning of the pandemic. Finally, planning for future public health emergencies should identify

points when certain groups should be consulted in a proactive, participatory manner to help embed human rights and equality considerations in policy-making.

All of these seem to me to be prudent and wise. It is now up to the new Government, of course, to fashion a health system that is more resilient, as the noble Lord, Lord Harris, said, and more equitable, ensuring that we are better equipped to face any future challenges. In the meantime, I for one certainly feel very grateful to the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, and the inquiry for the recommendations they have made so far.

6.45 pm

Lord Browne of Ladyton (Lab): My Lords, I draw attention to my entry in the register of interests, in particular that I am the vice-chair of and a consultant to the Nuclear Threat Initiative, which, despite its name, and although based in DC, has a global biosecurity programme that has a global reach and also draws on the expertise of global experts in biosecurity.

In my view, this report is measured, forensic but quietly damning. It identifies failures in the machinery of government and failures of co-ordination not merely between different departments but between central government and the devolved Administrations; a culture of complacency that regarded the existence of a decade-old strategy document as an adequate protection against a multiplicity of rapidly changing threats; and an absence of mechanisms for proper scrutiny that meant these failures went, all too often, unidentified and therefore unchallenged.

On page 22, point 2.25 of the report states:

“The last occasion on which the Threats, Hazards, Resilience and Contingencies sub-Committee”

of the National Security Committee

“met was in February 2017 ... In July 2019, the sub-Committee was formally taken out of the committee structure ... Ms Hammond”, the director of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat,

“accepted that it was, in effect, abolished. As a result, immediately prior to the pandemic, there was no cross-government ministerial oversight of the matters that were previously within the sub-Committee’s remit”.

All this happened because the sub-committee was released from its responsibilities on the instructions of the Prime Minister, Theresa May, to work on the preparation for an expected hard Brexit. Unfortunately, she was not the Prime Minister when that was seen not to be the case.

So why does the existence and dissolution of this otherwise obscure sub-committee matter and what was the result? As point 2.23 makes clear, the continuing role of this sub-committee was to provide

“the Prime Minister with an overview of the potential civil domestic disruptive challenges that the UK might face over the next 6 months”.

Point 2.24 goes further, asserting that this committee was

“important to the implementation of the UK Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Strategy 2011”

and that its existence

“was necessary to ensure that important issues were acted upon”.

So we were left with a void where a properly constituted oversight body should have been. As a result, we were effectively unable to implement even the 2011 strategy which, even if you do not accept it was heavily flawed and outdated, had lost its implementation machinery.

[LORD BROWNE OF LADYTON]

In part, I raise the question of this committee because it also reflects the findings of chapter 5 of the modular report, specifically points 5.118 and 5.119, which suggest that a “lack of openness” weakened our response and that regular, sustained and well-informed parliamentary scrutiny is a critical component of an effective preparedness strategy.

I first raised the issue of the Threats, Hazards, Resilience and Contingencies Sub-Committee in your Lordships’ House on 4 June 2020. In reply, I was told that I was not entitled to any comment on the particular Cabinet committees and would not be told anything, but instead would have to be assured that substantial planning was in place in respect of pandemics. Nothing of the sort existed.

Pursuing further information via Written Questions, I received three responses to three separate Questions. The first did not deal with my Question but referred to the committee in the past tense, and the second explicitly conceded that the sub-committee no longer existed. My third Question asked why, given that the committee had been dissolved, the GOV.UK official National Security Council website still listed it as operational. In reply, I was told that the website accurately reflected the NSC’s workings—in effect, contradicting the purport of the previous two Answers I received. If the Government’s aversion to openness was so total as to render me unable to ascertain the existence of the committee—let alone its workings and findings or the regularity of its meetings—it is perhaps unsurprising that the report finds that an absence of scrutiny contributed to our failure in preparedness.

Something that surprised me was the fact that the *UK Biological Security Strategy*—published in July 2018, shortly before Parliament rose—was never debated at any stage in Parliament and not mentioned. In the overlapping mesh of protections that we believed were in place, the 2018 strategy was directly relevant to pandemic preparedness. It is perhaps instructive that the governance board set up to implement this strategy was supposed to be the threats, hazards, resilience and contingencies sub-committee, which, as we now know, was disbanded less than 12 months later. While strategies are vital to risk mitigation, institutional memory and structural consistency are no less important. If future approaches to resilience are to succeed, in all our interests, institutional memory must be retained.

It was an absence of co-ordination, not merely between departments and other administrative structures but between the devolved Administrations and the UK Government, that enfeebled our response to Covid-19. This applies particularly to the relations between Holyrood and Westminster. When Nicola Sturgeon gave evidence to the inquiry in January, she was confronted with the Scottish Cabinet minutes. Dating from June 2020, the height of the pandemic, the minutes show that Ministers “agreed that consideration should be given to restarting work on independence and a referendum”.

As my researcher said—I use this unapologetically, but I credit him—that is like reacting to an uncontrollable fire starting in your kitchen by devoting an afternoon to considering whether to remove your partner’s name from the title deeds to the house. More seriously, it shows that time and attention were being diverted

from the Covid pandemic in Scotland towards narrow political manoeuvring. Asked whether the relationship between Nicola Sturgeon and Boris Johnson had broken down, Sturgeon’s chief of staff, Liz Lloyd, told the inquiry that the phrase

“broken down ... overstates what was there to break”

in the first place. That is hardly a promising basis for co-operation and partnership in facing the most significant public health crisis of modern times.

The manoeuvring was not one-sided. The inquiry heard that, ahead of the then Prime Minister’s trip to Orkney in July 2020, Michael Gove produced a briefing paper entitled *State of the Union*. This briefing suggested that the risk to the union was the “greatest challenge” facing the UK Government aside from the pandemic and that, in the lead-up to the Scottish elections of 2021,

“protecting and strengthening the Union must be a cornerstone of all that we do”.

The strength of my commitment to the cause of unionism in no way diminishes my belief that this paper, and Boris Johnson’s speech on that Orkney visit extolling the “sheer might and merit” of the union, suggest that priorities had gone severely awry in both Holyrood and Westminster.

While this first report from the inquiry makes significant criticisms of both the “labyrinthine ... complexity” of emergency planning infrastructure and the groupthink that affected both Ministers and the advice on which they rely, it is important to retain a clear focus on leadership—and, all too often, its absence—as a factor in our pandemic failures. Structures will not and cannot make people like and work with each other if they do not wish so to do. This is not to detract from the inquiry’s recommendations around the machinery of government—particularly recommendations 1, 2 and 8—but to draw your Lordships’ attention to the flaws outlined on pages 2 and 3. In particular, I was struck by the penultimate entry in what is an unsurprisingly long list:

“In the years leading up to the pandemic, there was a lack of adequate leadership, coordination and oversight. Ministers, who are frequently untrained in the specialist field of civil contingencies, were not presented with ... enough range of scientific opinion and policy options, and failed to challenge sufficiently the advice they did receive from officials and advisers”.

There is only a limited amount that structural changes can do in preventing future lapses of leadership and in mitigating against decisions made with imperfect, incomplete or simply inadequate levels of knowledge—but the best protection is scrutiny.

I have often had occasion to criticise them, but the last Government’s commitment to provide an annual resilience statement to Parliament was welcome. As point 5.120 of the inquiry’s report suggests, I believe that this commitment should be deepened and that a full analysis, complete with recommendations to improve preparedness, should be published on an annual basis.

My final observations today focus on the war-gaming exercises—Cygnus and Alice in particular—designed to stress-test our institutions and identify possible shortfalls in resourcing and preparedness that might hamper our ability to respond to a pandemic. It took repeated FoI requests from an NHS doctor to get the

previous Government to admit that they had undertaken Exercise Alice in 2016, which was designed to recognise the challenges should a coronavirus hit our shores. The report, redacted when published, revealed shortages of PPE, no plans for pandemic-related travel restrictions and a failure to have a working contact-tracing system—all of which we had to improvise when Covid hit.

Equally, Exercise Cygnus, undertaken in 2016, identified three key issues, including

“the restriction of movement of non-essential workers, different scenarios in pandemic planning that looked at the potential characteristics of pandemics, and other more radical measures to control transmission”.

None of those was included in the future work plan of the pandemic flu readiness board, let alone addressed. It is imperative that future exercises are followed by the establishment of specific and measurable pieces of preparedness work that directly address the challenges that are identified, not merely those that are the easiest or cheapest to engage.

Of course, all this wisdom is hindsight. Mistakes were made by Governments in the run-up to the last pandemic and, given that even Labour Ministers are very occasionally fallible, I do not even expect perfection from them. But history is there to be learned from, and I trust that this first report and its successors will be greeted in that spirit.

6.57 pm

Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie (Con): My Lords, I am delighted to contribute to this debate on the resilience and preparedness of the United Kingdom. I take the point made by the noble Baroness, Lady Thornton, that this is only the first of a number of modules, but it came as no surprise to me that the module 1 report concluded that:

“Emergency planning generally failed to account sufficiently for the pre-existing health and societal inequalities and deprivation in society”,

and that there was

“a failure to engage appropriately with those who know their communities best, such as local authorities, the voluntary sector and community groups”.

I declare my interests as laid out in the register. I was at the time of the pandemic, and still am, the chief executive of Cerebral Palsy Scotland, as well as chair of the Scottish Government’s National Advisory Committee for Neurological Conditions. I have also given much written and verbal evidence to the Scottish Covid inquiry under the chairmanship of the honourable Lord Brailsford. I share the frustration of the noble Lord, Lord Browne of Ladyton, that politics got in the way of the Governments of Holyrood and Westminster working together, and I slightly despair that we need to have two separate Covid inquiries running at the same time. The conclusions drawn in this module by the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, resonate with my experience and the experience of people with cerebral palsy during the pandemic, and I will concentrate on that today.

Right from the very earliest days, cerebral palsy was cited by the UK and devolved Governments and in the media as being a specific condition that left you more at risk from Covid-19. This messaging, which was based at the start on very little clinical evidence, continued

all the way through to the rollout of the vaccination programme, when people with CP were able to get their vaccinations early. However, it was coupled with the cessation of support services that this population relies on, which meant that people with CP and their families were left with considerable anxiety regarding what they should and could do to remain well.

In March 2020, with no consultation with disabled people themselves or the organisations that support them, all face-to-face services ceased. Community physiotherapy, occupational therapy and other AHP services were not deemed “essential”. Some adults with CP moved back to live with their sometimes rather elderly parents and family for lockdown, and some were too anxious about infection to allow carers into their home.

The inquiry’s report says that there was

“a failure to appreciate the full extent of the impact of government measures and long-term risks”

from the Covid pandemic

“on ... those with poor health or other vulnerabilities”.

These groups were already vulnerable, and yet what was essential to keep them well was denied them because such services were not deemed essential by those who were making the decisions. This reduction in services, together with restrictions that left many struggling to manage their condition, caused isolation and increased anxiety that we are still struggling to recover from today—over four years later. Medication, for example, was seen as a priority but physical therapy, occupational therapy or speech and language services were not, yet for people with CP, these are as vital to access on a regular basis as medication is for other conditions.

The closure of schools in particular had an extremely detrimental effect not only on children with CP but on their families. Anxiety levels about the risks to children with CP were such that many families did not feel confident to send their child into school even if a place was available. However, school time for these children is more than just about providing education. It is where therapy appointments happen, it benefits mental health and well-being through opportunities for social interaction, and it provides vital respite for family carers. Many children with CP have one-to-one support for their learning in school, yet families were left to cope unsupported with the demands of physical care needs in addition to educational needs. Many parents also had to juggle the requirements of non-disabled siblings or potentially trying to work from home. It is unsurprising that this stress had specific physical and mental health consequences.

The problems caused by the lack of understanding of people with CP were starkly illustrated by the implementation of shielding. Despite the Scottish Government reaching out to organisations such as Cerebral Palsy Scotland, there was no coherent approach. Due to a chronic lack of data on this population, people with CP could not be identified centrally, so many approached their local GP or paediatrician, allied health professionals or social workers to ask to be shielded, and professionals would err on the side of caution and suggest that people did shield without much thought for the consequences. Many more people with CP chose to voluntarily class themselves as “shielding” compared with the actual numbers who

[BARONESS FRASER OF CRAIGMADDIE]

received an official letter. Those people who received an official letter tended also to have other conditions, which meant that they were possibly more vulnerable to Covid as a result of comorbidities rather than CP, and they were certainly more visible to health professionals and easier to identify. However, it added to the picture of inconsistency, and we know that people fell through the gaps.

People did not understand the logic of who was or was not meant to shield, or where to go or who to ask for trusted information. The picture reported to Cerebral Palsy Scotland illustrated many variations across the country and that health and social care professionals, as well as people themselves, did not feel equipped to take decisions about their own level of risk.

I commend particularly the inquiry report's recommendation 5 on improving data and research for future pandemics. I was glad to hear the noble Baroness, Lady Merron, address in her opening remarks actions that the Government wish to take on this. People with cerebral palsy are invisible to service providers. The lack of a cerebral palsy register meant that, although they were very visibly classed as vulnerable, health and care and educational professionals did not have adequate data to identify where these people were within their communities and, given the umbrella nature of the condition, it was impossible for them to identify who actually was vulnerable and provide them with adequate support, as opposed to those with milder CP, who could be reassured and who could have been at no greater risk from Covid than the rest of the population.

I hope the Government will take the inquiry's recommendations seriously and will work in partnership with the devolved Administrations to improve our data and planning, and thus our resilience. Unfortunately, people with cerebral palsy remain invisible today, and I would welcome the opportunity to work with the Minister and her team to ensure that policymakers, service providers and professionals can identify this population, so that never again will decisions about them be made in isolation, with such devastating long-term consequences.

7.06 pm

Baroness Chakrabarti (Lab): My Lords, I declare interests as the former shadow Attorney-General who attended cross-party briefings with Ministers and officials in early 2020 and as a member of your Lordships' Committee inquiring into the operation of statutory inquiries in general.

The work of the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, and her team is to be commended for its ambition and delivery so far. The module report currently before your Lordships' House deals with UK pandemic resilience and preparedness, which, on the evidence before it, the inquiry found significantly wanting. Its findings and recommendations in this respect are clear, compelling and, in my opinion, rather difficult to quibble with—but of course quibbles none the less come. From my own recollection, meetings in January 2020 revealed significant gaps in both preparedness and even nimble thinking. A question I remember posing about the possible need for rationing and temporary

requisitioning of vital medicines, equipment and large vacant premises was met more than once with embarrassed silence.

However, this report also foreshadows other modules to follow, all of which must to some extent be interconnected. In the hope that the inquiry team will watch or at least read today's debate with interest, and with the aim of advocating towards areas of vital detailed inquiry still to be pursued, it is on as yet unexplored areas of pandemic handling that I intend to focus my remarks. I am especially concerned with the modules dealing with vaccines and therapeutics and with the UK's economic response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Once more, these are distinct discussions but with crucial overlap.

By way of introduction, it has long been my view that the pandemic was both a genuinely global tragedy justifying urgent and continuing international—rather than purely national, let alone, as we have heard, nationalistic—responses and a parable for every inequality and hypocrisy in our own nations and the wider world.

Here at home, health and other vital public service workers and volunteers displayed nothing short of heroism in our communities, risking their own lives—sometimes dressed in bin liners for meagre protection—to help others, even before a full understanding of the virus, let alone the advent of life-saving vaccines. They were akin to the unknown soldiers of the Great War. Some—including from minority ethnic and international communities—literally sacrificed their lives for others. By contrast, we saw some people panic-buying essential goods, corporate profiteering, corrupt firing and rehiring of staff in some service industries, so-called VIP lanes for public procurement, and a government inability or reluctance to tackle fraud in relation to Covid business support loans. That prompted the dramatic resignation of the noble Lord, Lord Agnew, from that Dispatch Box in your Lordships' House in January 2022.

Ordinary people and small businesses gave up precious liberties, livelihoods and lives during chilling but none the less proportionate lockdowns, yet there was often an asymmetry to lockdown enforcement and support. In the public mind this will perhaps be for ever symbolised by infamous parties at No. 10 and breaches of social distancing implicating not one but two former Prime Ministers, while the elderly died, grieved alone, or were tipped out of hospitals untested, often into unsafe care homes.

However, such inequities became even more distastefully graphic and counterproductive on the international stage, where deaths reached 7 million. Crucially, when critical vaccines arrived, as a result of large-scale public and philanthropic investment, normal rules on intellectual property were not promptly and temporarily waived to allow them to be shared at scale and at genuine production costs with millions of people in the global South. It was as if big pharma refused to share the floor-plan locating emergency exits in a burning building, even though Governments, charities and altruistic scientists had collaborated to build those fire escapes in the first place.

Of course, in a pandemic, even more than in a fire, hoarding lucrative but life-saving knowledge is counter-productive to public health, as the spread of a virus and its mutations anywhere risks new infections and

re-infections everywhere. Dead bodies floated down the sacred Ganges river, while subcontracted Indian manufacturers provided vaccines to be sent to the global North. If ever there was a justification for human rights principles to be applied more directly and effectively to international institutions and corporations, it was this.

Many leading voices at the WHO, in the Vatican and in the White House—at least, after President Biden took office—called for an activation of the TRIPS waiver for vaccine patents at the WTO. Gordon Brown was a leading UK proponent of this emergency measure, with so much support in the global South, where vaccination continued to be beyond the reach of too many. Shamefully, the UK Government were one of those who stubbornly blocked the measure in the interests of corporate profit. Some noble Lords opposite elegantly stonewalled on this question month after month as the death toll soared.

By way of context, after 9/11, the US faced a threat of anthrax, after samples were sent to key politicians. The US needed drugs to treat this disease but could not get supplies quickly enough, so it threatened the supplier, Bayer, with a compulsory licence, to allow the US to mass-produce the drug or obtain generic versions to treat people with anthrax. During Covid, Israel issued a compulsory licence to secure supplies of early drugs thought to be active, and Spain also changed laws to allow compulsory licensing.

There are understandable and proportionate precedents. If states believe that they are in a health emergency situation, just as they may demand social distancing and home-working for individuals and small businesses, they may issue compulsory licences in the face of corporate non-co-operation and greed. But how much more effective would it be to do this collectively at the international level, as proposed?

Unsurprisingly, and in response to the Covid-19 experience, there is currently legislation pending in the European Parliament in relation to EU-wide emergency compulsory licensing. Unlike the last Government, our new Government are internationalist in outlook and pro-human rights in their values. Will they learn lessons from the bitter fruit of nationalism, whether in racist public disorder on our streets or the disproportionate loss of life in health crises?

There are currently remarkable new drugs, such as lenacapavir, which prevents HIV infections. There are currently 1.3 million of these new infections in the world every year. The drug is sold in high-income countries for \$40,000 per patient per year, despite a potential annual production cost of just \$40. Without voluntary or compulsory licensing, this drug will be beyond the reach of millions of people in low and middle-income countries, meaning many unnecessary infections and deaths, with no hope of ending the epidemic. Often the poorest countries get better deals than middle-income ones, which are frequently left out of voluntary licence agreements. Further, the general problem of drug and vaccine inequity is surely a huge issue for pandemic prevention and response, now and in the future.

It is a marvel of human resilience that so many people have adjusted to life after the Covid-19 pandemic as if it were but a bad dream. However, we know that for a great many others its ramifications will be felt for decades to come. In some ways, it is not unlike a world

war in the scale of the existential threat that was posed and its human and economic costs. After World War II, statesmen across the political aisle and around the world came together to try to prevent reoccurrence by way of shared values and a machinery for co-operation. May we not do that again?

7.16 pm

Baroness Coussins (CB): My Lords, I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate and will highlight some important language-related issues, which arguably are implicit in the report's conclusions on the way in which communications and public health messaging contribute to preparedness and resilience, but which in my view need to be explicit, spelled out and acted on if future emergencies are not to leave some groups in society still disproportionately vulnerable.

I declare my interests as co-chair of the All-Party Group on Modern Languages and vice-president of the Chartered Institute of Linguists. The APPG made a detailed submission to the inquiry chaired by the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, on a number of issues. I am disappointed that none has been explicitly referred to, especially as they all seem to me to go to the very heart of the report's overarching recommendations on the importance of the response to whole-system civil emergencies and for the need better to target vulnerable people. Will the Minister agree to look closely at the APPG's recommendations, and ensure that they are explicitly woven into the Government's response to and implementation of the inquiry's recommendations?

Past and current experience in both the health service and the justice system has demonstrated all too starkly that, unless the needs of people who require translation or interpreting services are explicitly acknowledged and provided for, they will all too often instead be on the receiving end of casual, inadequate, unqualified or non-existent language services, to the obvious detriment of their health or human rights. I will flag up some headings of our key concerns and recommendations, as the detail can be found in our submission to the inquiry, which is already in the public domain.

First, as the report acknowledges—and as has been flagged up already today by the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of London—people from some ethnic minority groups had a significantly higher risk of being infected by Covid-19 and dying from it. There is evidence to show that the absence or delay of provision of public health messaging in languages other than English may have been a contributory factor to this. The 2023 report by the Race Equality Foundation, UCL and Doctors of the World stated that black and minority ethnic groups after two years were still three to five times more likely than white British adults to be unvaccinated and that the lack of targeted outreach and promotion contributed to this unequal take-up.

Back in October 2020, the Government's own quarterly report on Covid inequalities talked of improving public health communication for the so-called hard-to-reach groups, including people from ethnic minority backgrounds, but, strangely, also included a footnote that said:

“Translation into foreign languages is discouraged except in extraordinary circumstances because it conflicts with the government's approach to integration”.

[BARONESS COUSSINS]

There was also a significant disparity between the Government's response to, and preparedness for, the needs of British Sign Language users, as compared with the needs of people who speak little or no English. The former are covered by the AIS, the accessible information standard, but the latter are not. The APPG agreed with Healthwatch England that the AIS should be amended as part of better preparedness and inclusiveness in future emergency responses.

The second health issue concerns the test and trace scheme, which operated primarily as an English-only service. The National Audit Office reported that test and trace had stated that its call centres offered a language interpreter service. The claim was repeated by Ministers in Parliament, but an investigation by Sky News reported that DHSC claims that translations existed in up to 130 languages were "brazen" and "bizarre". Local government appeared to be no more consistent, publishing advice in English that non-English speakers should dial 119 or use the Covid app if they needed to contact test and trace in another language. Now, given that the function of test and trace was meant to be contacting people proactively, putting the onus on them to contact the service for information in a language they did not even speak was never likely to be effective.

The third health issue concerns public service interpreters working in the NHS. Most are freelance and many complained that no one was taking responsibility for providing them with PPE. The Government funded the provision of a quarter of a million clear face masks for British Sign Language interpreters, but no equivalent provision was made for spoken word interpreters. In answers to Oral and Written Questions I tabled, the noble Lord, Lord Bethell, the Minister responsible at the time, helpfully clarified in July 2020 that individual hospitals were responsible for providing the interpreters with PPE and in December he said that GP practices had a similar obligation. Nevertheless, many public service interpreters found that in practice they were expected to turn up having procured their own PPE. The all-party group believes that, if the provision of language services were included in the accessible information standard that I mentioned earlier, this kind of support and equipment would in future be more easily identified and forthcoming and would be one clear way in which overall preparedness could be improved.

This inquiry report focuses on the health aspects of the pandemic, but there were other parts of the public sector where language-related issues arose, notably in the justice system, because lockdown measures prompted a large shift towards remote court hearings, which required the use of public service interpreters in virtual proceedings. A series of major reports found significant concerns about the suitability of remote interpreting, including misunderstandings, delays, poorly performing technology and missed verbal and non-verbal cues. The APPG recommends that the MoJ should caution against any systematic trend towards more widespread use of this practice until and unless the right lessons have been learned from the Covid experience. The same concerns and caution also apply, of course, to the suitability of remote interpreting in healthcare settings.

Education also suffered in various ways and the impact of Covid on pupils and students was more marked in the case of disadvantaged families and communities. One example is the children of asylum seekers living in asylum facilities and refugee centres who faced especially acute deprivation, often with no provision of laptops for access to basic education.

I look forward to the Minister's response on the issues I have raised and hope that in future the Government will be more attuned than in the past to the need to be explicit about language issues, cultural sensitivities and translation and interpreting services in the context of any future pandemic or other emergency situation.

7.25 pm

Lord Winston (Lab): My Lords, in 1917, at the height of the terrors of the First World War, Hilaire Belloc wrote to GK Chesterton and said, "Sometimes it's necessary to lie damnably in the interests of the nation". And 103 years later we had another, much smaller catastrophe: the pandemic that we are talking about now. It was not quite global but it came close—and it was certainly very serious. Something that we have not discussed very much about this report is the question of the believability of what we were hearing about the pandemic, and that is a more serious question to be answered.

I must say that it was a pleasure to work behind my noble friend Lady Thornton, who again and again, absolutely selflessly, led the way in the debates. What was encouraging to both of us—certainly to me; I must say that I have not discussed this with her—were the repeated answers of the noble Lord, Lord Bethell, for the Government, who, I think, tried to speak honestly and directly every time. He even answered emails almost immediately. He was sometimes somewhat indiscreet; I am not going to say exactly what his emails said—that is between him and me—but he certainly was one of the really good people in this. But, on the whole, not all the Government, in many people's minds, come out quite so well.

It is also reassuring to consider that it was wonderful to see both Chris Whitty and Patrick Vallance—now the noble Lord, Lord Vallance—supporting the Government, but how difficult it was for them to be, with the Prime Minister in the centre, in a kind of showcase. This is very difficult for scientists who have to do their best to tell complete truth wherever they can and to be as objective as they can when, in fact, there are political considerations through no fault of any of them. Anyhow, one of the issues is that, since the pandemic, the reputation of politics has not yet got back to where it should be—that is rather important.

I want to discuss two issues. One has just been touched on by the noble Baroness, Lady Coussins: the question of track and trace. That is a very good example. At one stage, I remember, at a committee meeting, inquiring rather rudely of the noble Baroness, Lady Harding, who was then invited to lead track and trace, "Why is it that people don't trust you?" She looked a bit amazed that anybody could ask her that question and her advisers and officials did not help. About 10 days later, I got a message asking whether I would respond to a phone call. It had to be done by

the hour, so, at a certain time, she phoned me and said, "Is it really true that people don't trust me?" I said, "Well, do you think that people are trusting track and trace? They're not". "Why not?" I said, "Well, being tracked and traced is an invasion of your privacy, for one thing; it gives you the risk that you might find out something that you don't want to hear; it gives you the risk that you might not have wanted to be in the place that you were tracked from, and so on". She said, "Well, what should we have done?" I said, "Well, it's pretty obvious, isn't it? One way of changing public opinion is by demonstrating that it would be good for the person concerned. So you say, 'If you're traced and diagnosed, you'll get much quicker treatment before any serious consequences of the disease are present'". "Oh", she said, "I must run and tell the Prime Minister".

That was not a brilliant example, but it is interesting because, thinking about it, the other issue I am tangling with is the reverse: the mistrust of vaccines. It was very clear that a lot of people were scared of the vaccine. That fear was increasingly caused because the politicians and people promoting the vaccine were not, or did not appear to be, trustworthy. To be fair, the vaccine had been produced almost like a rabbit out a hat—completely unexpectedly, like magic, very quickly, without thorough testing or going through the usual regulatory formulae. Of course, people started to get a few symptoms or side-effects, some of which were later quite serious.

There is an interesting connection between those two issues. A person who is ill might benefit from test and trace but, with a vaccine, it is best for everybody else but not you to be vaccinated. Herd immunity will suit you just as well and you would not run the risk of having the vaccine. We could have learned that from the outbreak of measles in London, just 15 years ago, when government officials were telling people that they must have the vaccine. We saw mothers holding their babies on television. The ethical responsibility of the mother concerned is to make certain that her baby is not harmed, but the great harm might well be the vaccine that she is about to receive for the baby. It is a failure of understanding and of dialogue between people.

We must recognise that we need to do much better with public engagement. The public engagement between the Government and the populace was woeful in the pandemic. The press and rumour-mongers often did not help, neither did the various media, but this is something important that we should consider.

I ask the noble Baroness to address this in her reply to the debate. The Blair Government made a considerable attempt to increase our understanding of how we might better engage the public by giving them better information and having dialogue with them. That worked very well. We were trying to tackle some big issues at that time. One was nuclear waste, another was genetic modification and another was the new nanotechnology coming into medicine, which was puzzling because of different effects at different cell levels.

We have to recognise that a Government cannot succeed unless they are trusted. I hope that this side of the House recognises that over the next few years. I do not pretend for a moment that it is simple to do. While I cannot comment on the Prime Minister at the time, Boris Johnson, I do not think that Asquith was trusted

by the populace during the pandemic of 1918-19 and the Great War beforehand. But it is important that we try to find ways to trust.

One of the most interesting lessons was in the Reith lecture given by the noble Baroness, Lady O'Neill, who touched on this. We should go back and look at some of the things she said, as well as at our Select Committee report on science and society. We need to understand how we can do this better, because otherwise we will always have these problems in science. We need to be much clearer about how we will deal with them in the future, and I hope that this new Government try to renew interest in some of those issues.

7.34 pm

Baroness O'Grady of Upper Holloway (Lab): My Lords, I declare my interest as I was the leader of the TUC when the pandemic struck and when the TUC sought and secured core status at the public inquiry.

Here is the hard truth that the public inquiry has revealed: faced with the greatest challenge that our country has experienced since the Second World War, the UK's defences were weak and deficient. Years of severe spending cuts—so-called austerity policies—left public services woefully ill equipped and underprepared, and now we are paying the price. This is proof, if ever it were needed, that austerity is a false economy.

The report of the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, found that public health, the NHS and the social care sector's capacity to respond to the pandemic was "constrained" by funding, and that public service infrastructure was "not fit for purpose" and struggled with "severe staff shortages". We all know that the human cost of austerity was high. Key workers on the front line of this war were sent over the top, without even proper PPE. Tens of thousands of unfilled vacancies left the staff who were on duty stretched beyond breaking point.

We now know that billions were wasted on VIP-lane Covid contracts, but that money was not found to fill vacancies by improving pay. In other words, there was a failure to invest in a workforce that would be fit to face a pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic, I spent many hours listening to key workers who were exhausted and demoralised. Endemic low pay, reliance on zero-hour and agency contracts, and real-wage reductions, had seen experienced staff walk away and made it much harder to attract new staff. Pressure on the front line was intolerable, not least when staff going to work every day knew that not only their own health but that of their families was at risk.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, public services did not magically bounce back. On the contrary, NHS hospital waiting lists reached record levels. Ministers, who had once praised key workers, quickly turned to blaming them. Rather than sit down and negotiate with staff unions in good faith, Ministers in effect walked out. After years of putting up with falling living standards, staff voted to take record levels of industrial action.

Instead of dealing with the root causes of discontent, the then Government sought to suppress the symptoms, banning strikes by the back door with the Strikes

[BARONESS O'GRADY OF UPPER HOLLOWAY]
(Minimum Service Levels) Act. In fact, no public service employer ever made use of that new law because, as Ministers were warned many times, to do so would only have poured fuel on the fire.

I hope to hear whether the Minister agrees that an explicit part of any resilience plan should be good industrial relations. Securing industrial peace is vital to the future of public service resilience. Positive industrial relations require mutual respect and all parties being willing to meet and negotiate. More than that, they require a recognition that the foundation for good public services is fair treatment of the workforce.

That is why our new Government deserve credit for taking the sensible road of honouring pay review body recommendations, actively resolving disputes, taking at least small steps towards pay restoration and promising a new deal for working people. By the time the next crisis strikes, we must have learned our lesson.

As the public inquiry report found, a failure to invest in systems of protection, including for staff who provide services, would dangerously damage the UK's preparedness and resilience in the future. That is why criticism in some quarters of our Government for settling public service disputes is, frankly, so short-sighted, cynical and crass. Does my noble friend the Minister share my dismay that these critics have apparently forgotten the findings of the Covid public inquiry so soon? Any mature assessment of the lessons from the pandemic is that a Government working hard to restore full staffing of public services and harmonious industrial relations is key to our future resilience and response.

We must go further. A second key lesson is that we must mend our broken sick pay system. Today, UK statutory sick pay is just over £116 a week, ranked as one of the worst rates in Europe. The Government have inherited a system that requires a three-day waiting period, which leaves families with no savings literally penniless. Around 1 million workers who earn less than the lower earnings limit—two thirds of them women, and often on the minimum wage—are excluded from statutory sick pay altogether. During the pandemic, this system presented many workers with the Hobson's choice of going into work when they were ill and should not have done, risking spreading the virus, or staying home unable to afford to feed their families. In my experience, this was particularly true for workers on insecure contracts, where staying home brings the added risk of losing out on offers of future shifts. We will never know exactly how many preventable illnesses and deaths were caused by our inadequate sick pay system, but it is a mistake that our country cannot afford to repeat. That is why I am proud that Labour is committed to ensuring that statutory sick pay is genuinely universal and that it will be paid from day one.

The final lesson I want to highlight, which has been raised by others and was acknowledged in the public inquiry report, is that high levels of inequality based on class, race, geography and disability left the UK particularly vulnerable to the virus. The evidence is clear: inequality fuelled the spread of the pandemic and the number of preventable deaths. The Covid bereaved families' campaign has expressed concern that, so far, the inquiry has not paid enough attention to tackling that underlying driver of poor public health

in the UK. I believe that that concern is justified, but the point is not just to acknowledge the problem of poverty and inequality but to fix it. From improving housing to health, and education to employment, there is much work to do. For sure, we owe it to those who lost their lives, including key workers, not just to repair and rebuild our public services but to build a fairer, more equal Britain.

7.43 pm

Lord Hannan of Kingsclere (Con): My Lords, on 27 March 1913, the population of Columbus, Ohio, started running. Afterwards, nobody was exactly sure why or when. James Thurber, the comic novelist, was a schoolboy in the town and recalled the incident in a famous article some years later. He said that perhaps it was simply someone suddenly remembering an appointment to meet his wife, and then a paperboy in high spirits joined in, and then perhaps a portly man of affairs broke into a trot, and before you knew it, the entire high street, from the union depot to the courthouse, was running. After the run had begun, people began to look for a justification, and the hubbub, the noise, eventually formed into one word: the dam had burst. Nobody stopped to point out that there was zero evidence of it having burst and that, anyway, even if it had, it could not have possibly reached Columbus, Ohio. People ran on for several more miles and then, eventually, sheepishly returned to the town. Here is the point: Thurber said that years passed before anyone dared mention it. Everyone carried on with their business as usual—and woe betide you if you made some jokey remark about the day the dam did not break.

It seems to me that we are in a very similar place with the lockdowns. Then, too, we saw herd instinct at its worst: people joining in one after another without stopping to think. It is an interesting counterfactual to ask what would have happened if the first sign of the pandemic had not been in autocratic China but in a country where lockdowns, the confinement of the entire population, would have been unthinkable—let us say if it had started in the Netherlands or Canada or somewhere. It started in China; then there was the attempt by the Italian Government to stop people moving from north to south; and then, suddenly, lockdowns, which had never been foreseen in any previous planning document, were considered a standard tool of public policy overnight. We were panicked into a response that no one had foreseen prior to those days—by shrieking broadcasters such as Piers Morgan, night after night, saying, “Why aren't we copying these other countries?”, and all the signs up saying, “Covidiot's go home”—and, rather like the people of Columbus, Ohio, we did not stop to think, and we still do not want to go back and ask whether it was justified or proportionate.

It is not true to say that there was no plan or that it was a plan for the wrong pandemic. We had a plan that we had worked out in cooler-headed times, at precisely the moment when you are supposed to think rationally about these things. We heard from my noble friend Lord Lansley about a number of the things in it. He said, well, maybe we were wrong about those things, but there has been no evidence at all that the original 2011 plan was wrong to say that face masks

would be ineffective at containing a disease or that closing schools would have little impact or, indeed, to make the basic supposition that if you are dealing with something that will spread throughout the population, your best bet is to do that in a way that minimises fatalities rather than pretending that you can stop it altogether.

Actually, there was one country that kept to our plan. They did not have the resources to do their own, so they simply downloaded ours. That was Sweden, which I will come back to in a moment.

Like James Thurber's citizens in Columbus, we are finding it difficult properly to relive the indignities and horrors that we went through, from the grievous ones, such as people unable to say farewell to dying loved ones, to the trivial ones, such as the debates about whether a Scotch egg counts as a meal. We have forgotten the taped-off playgrounds, the drones sent up to pursue solitary walkers, the police in Derbyshire pouring dye into a lake so it would be less of a beauty spot, and the "pingdemic"—that bizarre period when people were self-diagnosing so that, if they could not take time off work they would self-diagnose as being all clear, and if they felt like a little time off they would claim to have been infected. We have crammed all of these into some remote corner of our memory. In fact, the very difficulty of those things became an argument for continuing. We got into the worst kind of sunk cost fallacy. In fact, the Secretary of State at the time explicitly used that argument: we have been through so much, so let us not let it all be for nothing.

By then, almost everything was pushed into a retrospective justification for the measures that we and other Governments—with one exception—had taken. If infections went up, everyone said, "Well, we can't relax the restrictions. It would be extremely dangerous". If they came down, everyone said, "Oh, it's working. We just need to carry on with this". People kept on saying, "Follow the science", but the one thing that we were not doing was applying the normal scientific method. Karl Popper defines science as something that can be disproved, but woe betide you if you even asked the most basic questions at that time about whether there was proportionality. We already had the evidence by the end of April 2020 that Sweden had followed the same trajectory as everywhere else: that the infections had peaked and declined in a place where there were only the most minimal of measures, banning large meetings but otherwise relying on people to use their common sense.

That is what a scientific approach would have done. It would have said, "Consider the control in the experiment". We had a laboratory-quality control there all along—we had a country that had stuck to the plan that we were panicked out of following.

What can we see about the results in Sweden? First, and most obviously, there is not a smoking crater where its economy used to be. In fact, Sweden suffered less of an economic hit in the pandemic than it did in the 2008 financial crisis. The Swedish budget was back in surplus by 2021—imagine that. The last Government were done for by our selective amnesia about the cost of these lockdown measures and the current one will be too, because people still do not like to face the fact

that for the better part of two years we paid people to stay at home, we borrowed from our future selves, and that money would eventually need to be paid back.

What if it was all for nothing? Let us ask the question: what price did Sweden pay for sparing its economy? At the time we were told that there would be an almost civilisational collapse there. I remember the *Sun* had the headline, "Heading for disaster", while the *Guardian's* was, "Leading us to catastrophe". The argument was not that Sweden might end up with a slightly better or worse death rate than other countries, it was that this would be an outlier by any measure—that there would be bodies piled up in the streets.

The data are now more or less in. It was very difficult to track these things at the time because different countries have different methodologies. Different countries have different ways of measuring fatalities. Were people dying of Covid or with Covid? There were some territories which could not measure even that because they did not have a sufficiently advanced healthcare system. I think of my native Peru, which had about the toughest lockdown on the planet and about the worst fatality rate—again, showing how little correlation there was.

The one thing you can measure with a consistent methodology is excess mortality. You can apply the same calculation to any given population. You can say how many people died in the previous three years, how many you would then expect to die in this period, and compare that with what actually happened. You can be more sophisticated and factor in obesity and age profile and so on. However you do it, you find that Sweden ends up with one of, or on several measures, the lowest excess mortality rate in Europe. This should be the only thing the inquiry is looking at and we are debating, and yet it is somehow considered bad form even to mention it. We are still, like the citizens of Columbus, Ohio, unwilling to face the fact that it may have been disproportionate.

Among the institutions that put Sweden as the single lowest excess mortality rate in Europe are the BBC and the ONS. This is not some Barrington declaration fringe thing, these are the data. Yet there is this extraordinary readiness to tiptoe around rather than face them.

Should this not be the sole focus of the inquiry whose provisional findings we are discussing? Should not the only question that really matters be: were non-pharmaceutical interventions effective? Given the cost of the ruined educations, the elderly people isolated and the debt, was it proportionate? We should not be asking that question in a vindictive spirit. I understand that people have to err on the side of caution, that there was a panicky atmosphere and that we were dealing with something we did not know. It is understandable that people have to go with the best models they can find. But we no longer have to rely on models. We now have actual hard data. Yet we seem extraordinarily reluctant to ask the central question: did lockdowns work? Did they work a little bit but not enough to justify the dislocation? Did they work a great deal? Or, as the Swedish case *prima facie* would suggest, did they not work at all? Did they in fact drive up the mortality rate because of unrelated healthcare problems—everything from unscreened diagnoses to the fact of confining people and denying them exercise?

[LORD HANNAN OF KINGSCLERE]

How is it that we can have this lengthy and expensive inquiry—Sweden has completed both its inquiries and moved on while we were still getting around to phase 1—and have had all those conversations, and not asked that one central question?

Looking at this interim report, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that it is results-driven, or at the very least tendentious. In fact, you could infer almost everything you needed to know about this inquiry from the fact that, incredibly, witnesses were required to take a Covid test. It must be the last place in discovered space where this is still a thing, where Covid is not treated as an endemic disease.

You could tell from the tone of the questions what the conclusions would be—that the Government should have done more; that it was insufficient; why did we not lock down earlier or why did we not lock down harder?—all of it begging the question, all of it making assumptions that have, until now at any rate, not been interrogated, let alone proved.

This matters because, as the Minister said at the start, there is bound to be another pandemic and therefore knowing whether lockdowns work should be a critical question of public policy. Although, I have a horrible feeling that even if we were to rewrite, in a cool-headed way, a response plan without lockdowns, the evidence of 2020 is that such a plan, however reasonable and moderate, would be torn up in a panic under pressure from shrieking broadcasters and angry newspaper headlines.

7.56 pm

Lord Whitty (Lab): My Lords, as the last speaker from the Back Benches, I do not intend to comment on everybody's speeches, but I do hope that the noble Lord, Lord Hannan, makes his own submission to the inquiry, because it is a vital point. I would like to see how the inquiry and its advisers deal with his point. I say no more.

It is probably just as well that I do not comment widely because my own expertise in the health field is limited to virtually nil and my experience with pandemics relates to my period as a Minister dealing with the foot and mouth epidemic; in other words, in the livestock area. While there are vast differences, and the authorities in livestock epidemics have means of controlling them that would not be acceptable to the human population in any civilised society, there are also some features that are the same. Principally, those are that the authorities in the agriculture and related sectors did not have a very clear plan; there was no mutual understanding between the industry and Defra; we changed our policy several times during the period; and probably more cattle—or beasts in general—lost their lives than needed to.

There have been inquiries into that epidemic and inquiries into this pandemic. On my count, there have been—I think the noble Lord, Lord Lansley, referred to this—six key inquiries into what to do in an epidemic, beginning with the one after SARS in 2003 and going right through to the recent one in 2018. The one common feature that is clear—the noble Lord referred to this—is that there were a lot of recommendations, some of them were taken up, many of them were not,

and many of those that were taken up were dropped or severely modified. I hope that this inquiry produces recommendations that can be sustained and that health practitioners, scientists and everybody is convinced at least by the main thrust of the inquiry's recommendations. The module that we have already received will be supplemented by much more detailed ones, but it already raises a number of very serious concerns.

The fact that those inquiries have not been followed through by successive Governments is a worry, and I hope that we can have a very serious follow-through by something like a resilience structure in government, which my noble friend Lord Harris referred to, and that that will have clear backing from Parliament and the new Government.

I want to end with one final, crucial area that has not been touched on. The theme of the report is referred to in terms such as “putting into place”, “failing to put into place” and “needing to put into place” contingency plans for a surge in resources, particularly during the immediate response. My namesake Professor Chris Whitty—no relation—expresses it as a way of stopping a pandemic in its tracks. Three things have to be in place to do that during any form of pandemic or virus-based epidemic: testing; tracing; and making sure that all the equipment required, from PPE to syringes and everything else, is already in place and can be stepped up according to the severity of the epidemic.

I asked Ministers in the previous Government about the recommendation in some of these reports that we get agreements in place well in advance to sort out not only the incredibly complex governmental structure—it is reproduced in the report and involves an incredibly complicated network of bodies—but the resources in private, university and research areas. For example, there needs to be an agreement so that, as soon as a pandemic becomes evident, a system makes available laboratories in the public sector and in the rest of society, together with testing arrangements, and makes the availability, specification and distribution of PPE clear well in advance. In order to do that, public sector bodies need to have in place as soon as possible protocols on those facilities becoming available as soon as a pandemic is declared. In the private, educational and research sectors, we need to have protocols—contracts, in effect—with money paid up front so that those private facilities will be transferred into producing as soon as possible the equipment needed to test and trace, and the materials and equipment needed for combating the pandemic. They would therefore drop research work and commercial ventures, because those stand-down contracts were already available.

I asked the previous Minister—it was not the noble Baroness, Lady Neville-Rolfe—some months ago whether such contracts were already in place, but I have to say that I got a rather equivocal answer. I ask the Minister, and the previous Minister if she cares to comment, whether, if a pandemic started or was clearly threatening us tomorrow, we would have available those facilities.

Lord Winston (Lab): I am grateful to my noble friend for giving way. This is a time-limited debate, so I shall make just one point. There was a public service laboratory that was closed down. It was a wonderful

institution that many noble Lords will remember. It is something we should have not just for a pandemic, but as a continuous resource for unexpected and unusual things that affect the nation, particularly bacteriology.

Lord Whitty (Lab): I thank my noble friend for that. That shows that we are going backwards with public facilities, but private and other facilities also need to be mobilised immediately and a judgment made on how long we need to do that, according to the success or otherwise of our control of a pandemic. I put it to the Minister in the new Government that if that has not yet been put in place on a wide scale, it should be one of the priorities. I hope she can reply positively on that. I also hope that industry research labs of all sorts would respond. In the previous case, we were panicking to get them in place, and it led to some corner-cutting that in turn led to accusations of some dubious behaviour. I do not want to go into that, but if we had systems in place already, none of that would be a problem. Since nobody else has mentioned it, I hope the Minister and the ex-Minister can reply and give me some assurance on that basis.

8.05 pm

Baroness Brinton (LD): My Lords, I declare my interest as a vice president of the Local Government Association. The report by the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, *UK Covid-19 Inquiry Module 1: The Resilience and Preparedness of the United Kingdom*, is an effective and thorough distillation of the difficulties, and of the failures by Ministers, officials and perhaps even by wider society as well. She and the Minister remind us that we must always remember the bereaved, those who lost their lives, survivors and those on the front line who dedicated their lives, sometimes literally, to dealing with the crisis that we perhaps failed to deal well with. From these Benches, I start by remembering the hundreds of thousands who died, including some Members of your Lordships' House, families and friends, those who survived and those whose lives changed for ever as a result. This inquiry and its reports must be the action we need to take to ensure that we do not make the same mistakes again.

My noble friend Lady Tyler reminded us of the scandal of hospitals releasing patients into care homes, bringing Covid with them. I remember the "do not resuscitate" orders placed on disabled patients' files without their or their family's knowledge, until that was stopped. I thank Ministers for dealing with that as soon as it appeared to be an issue. We also want to thank the many NHS front-line staff as well as the people in public health, local government, transport and food chains, who, in those earliest and darkest days in March and April 2020—often without PPE, and, for many, with enormous sacrifice—ensured that everything could be done to keep the country going. These people were selfless and are our heroes. I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Fraser, for her focus on those with cerebral palsy and other disabilities. She is right that they are still living with the consequences.

This inquiry has got the measure of those issues. Recommendations must be accepted and acted on as soon as possible. As others have said, who knows when

the next pandemic will arrive? The noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, is clear, from the evidence, that it will.

Politicians, civil servants and public officials got it wrong. The noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, says in the report that

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

assuming that it would be like flu, as in the 2011 strategy and later: the wrong pandemic. Worse, Ministers instructed civil servants and officials to focus all their efforts on preparations for a no-deal Brexit, so pandemic exercises did not happen at the highest levels and those that did happen were ignored in Whitehall.

The report talks about the lack of leadership, appropriate challenge and oversight. I shall contrast our experience with what happened in Taiwan. I use this as an example to the noble Lord, Lord Frost, of how it is possible to have not just a learning Government but a learning society. That country learned from its previous experience of SARS and other national emergencies, and its pandemic system moved swiftly into action. The key was reminding citizens of what was expected every day and taking them with them. The spread was so low that Taiwan did not have to lock down. Every single day, there was a Minister and an official on TV not doing press conferences, but taking questions live from the public until all the questions were finished every day. Taiwan had six deaths in the first year.

I want also to raise a point on Sweden. Although I have heard the noble Lord, Lord Hannan, make many points about Sweden in the past, the one thing he never mentions is that Sweden's culture is very like that of the Taiwanese in that the relationship between the governors and the governed is much more trustworthy than we have in this country. I am sure that is one of the main reasons that things worked.

The Taiwanese version of test, trace and isolate, including universal masking being totally accepted and digital technology helping people to isolate, was operated locally. If people were asked to isolate, they had a call every day from someone in their local council or nearby to ask what they needed from the shops or the chemist, and it was brought to their door. People knew they were supported—no civil emergency but a nation working together—and the key to their success was learning from SARS.

So I ask: have we learned from Covid? The noble Lord, Lord Bilimoria, recounted the Premier League arrangements made possible by regular testing. He is absolutely right; that is an example of where we did get it right in this country, but we needed to get it right for everyone.

I believe that the recommendations must be accepted and acted on as soon as possible; that is one of the reasons why we need a module now that reports so that work can proceed, advising government, Civil Service, the NHS and other public bodies.

I am so pleased to see the noble Baroness, Lady Thornton, in her place. She and I were the two Opposition Front-Benchers in January 2020 and, between us, we saw Covid through with the support of our

[BARONESS BRINTON]

colleagues. We covered over 580 pieces of legislation in Parliament, and well over 300 of those were on health. I give way to the noble Baroness.

Baroness Thornton (Lab): I think that, possibly, I saw the noble Baroness and the Minister more than I saw my husband for several months.

Baroness Brinton (LD): I confess that I was probably in the same position. The noble Baroness, Lady Thornton, and I were always commentating on the regulations, but it was always post-event. One issue we need to look at is emergency legislation being enacted with us being able to see it only after it has happened. I understand that that was the case at the start, but we were still seeing emergency legislation only two years on. That is unacceptable.

My noble friend Lady Tyler talked about vulnerable people at risk because of poverty. The noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, rightly made the point, as she always does, about language support being so vital. Your Lordships will not be surprised to hear me say that clinically vulnerable people have expressed concern that the modules outlined at the start of the inquiry seem to ignore their plight. The noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, said that the experience of vulnerable people would be threaded through her inquiry and its reports. I want to thank her for her clear recommendations in relation to clinically vulnerable people as well as those who are vulnerable for other reasons. Six of the 10 recommendations specifically mention them. I may mention them again later.

Can the Minister assure the House that the recommendations will be implemented at pace throughout all levels of national, state and local government and public agencies? Nobody has mentioned that the inquiry reprinted the extraordinary spidergrams that constituted the departmental and structural response to the emergencies. The report also noted that many with civil emergency pandemic preparedness responsibilities had full-time roles in their departments, meaning that planning and review were easy to push into the future. Will key staff with this responsibility now have time to read, think and do the regular reviews and exercises to ensure that, as and when an emergency occurs, a smoothly run system will kick into place as it did in Taiwan and Sweden?

It was also egregious that preparing for Brexit knocked everything else out of the way in Whitehall, including postponing those regular pandemic exercises. As other noble Lords have asked, how will this new Government remove groupthink from their and officials' behaviour? As the noble Lord, Lord Harris, pointed out, we may need a change in system thinking too.

Interestingly, groupthink has also come up in the Horizon Post Office inquiry and the Infected Blood Inquiry; I am sure it will also come up in the Grenfell Tower inquiry tomorrow. This is a massive undertaking for government. The comments from the noble Baroness, Lady Thornton, about the role of Parliament were important as well: about how important our role of scrutinising government becomes at times like this. Can the Minister tell us what success will look like to the Government about how things have really changed,

because groupthink about success is also sometimes part of the problem? I am very pleased that the Government are proposing a duty of candour. I think such a duty will help change the practice of Ministers being told what civil servants think Ministers want to hear.

The report is clear that the local directors of public health were not utilised effectively. They and their teams of local government environmental health officers were often ignored and dictated to, and they were ignored in their roles in local areas. The Association of Directors of Public Health continued to do all that they could throughout. I remember a conversation with one of them about 10 days after the February half term in 2020. It was evident to him at that point that a number of families had picked up Covid in northern Italy, and it was spreading swiftly into his local schools. They could not get this taken seriously further up the line despite needing powers to be able to close down independent schools—they could close down state schools but not independent schools. As a result, independent schools and the families of those attending them had a faster spread than elsewhere.

The noble Lord, Lord Lansley talked about the 2011 plan thinking only about schools in high-impact areas. Our early experience post that February 2020 half term may have guided people to say, "If we can't control spread in schools, we're going to have to do something else". There was no test, trace and isolate at that point, and spread was just not contained.

The Minister talked about flexible systems, but will they also be local? Directors of public health and their teams in local councils and local NHS are well placed to help. Please can we guarantee that they will be involved?

The noble Lord, Lord Frost, was unhappy with module reporting. I disagree with him because the major changes that have to happen, and which are recognised by many past Ministers and the new Government, are major and will and should take time to get right. We do not know when the next pandemic will happen; perhaps it is brewing already. There is not just antimicrobial resistance, as outlined by the noble Lord, Lord Lansley, but the person-to-person transmission of avian flu, now happening in parts of the US, Texas in particular. Time is not on our side.

The Minister said in the previous Statement in late July, following the publication of this report, that the previous Government had changed the way they accessed, analysed and shared data. It is essential to get that right but the last Government and UKHSA have cancelled wastewater testing for Covid, which is essential for early detection and monitoring. It continues in Scotland, which is one of the differences there, and in the USA and other countries. This makes it difficult for officials to spot early signs of increased cases and outbreaks.

The cancellation of Covid testing unless you are in hospital or in a care setting means that it is very difficult to gauge the level in the community. The ONS and ZOE data were helpful. Will the Government reconsider that background data? The noble Lord, Lord Hannan, said that Covid is endemic. It is not endemic yet. I hope we are out of a pandemic but Covid is not everywhere and safe for everybody. It is not endemic.

Knowing what is happening becomes important. We have hospitals telling clinical staff not to wear masks, even though there is Covid in their hospital. One academy school is saying this week that it is fine for symptomatic Covid children to return to school immediately, and we have schools still refusing to provide ventilation in classrooms that would allow clinically vulnerable children to return to school.

In July, the Minister said in the Statement that the Government's first responsibility is to keep the public safe, so can the Minister assure your Lordships' House on the urgent and outstanding issue of PPE, masks and ventilation being provided and encouraged where necessary to help reduce spread. I am not talking about everywhere, but where necessary.

I am also glad that the noble Lord, Lord Reid, referred to mpox. I am pleased that the noble Baroness, Lady Chakrabarti, raised TRIPS waivers and Gavi as well. They are really important. I know somebody who is going to the DRC next week. They will be working in the refugee camps and their doctor went to UKHSA to ask whether they could have a vaccination. They were told that the UK is not issuing any vaccines. Unfortunately, there are no vaccines in Goma in the DRC at all. This is not on. Perhaps the Minister could find out what is happening and why this Government are not taking this report seriously.

I wanted to talk about other things such as the longer-term effect of long Covid. I want to mention very briefly that the NHS has fired many of its front-line clinical staff who got severe long Covid because they could not prove they got the Covid in the hospitals. That is a disgrace and I think it will come back to bite the NHS in the future.

I want to end by referring to *Pale Rider* by Laura Spinney, published in 2016, on the Spanish flu. In the final chapter, on memory, she says:

"Memory is an active process. Details have to be rehearsed ... But who wants to rehearse the details of a pandemic? ... Instead, there was silence and a loss of memory".

Are we sure that we will not have a loss of memory in the next three to five years? Will the recommendations from the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, make us become that new learning for government and society so that next time we can respond like Taiwan and Sweden?

8.20 pm

Baroness Neville-Rolfe (Con): My Lords, I thank the Minister, the noble Baroness, Lady Merron, and all who have spoken. It has been a timely and extremely interesting debate. I think we all feel for the grief of those who lost family and friends during Covid, for those who are still suffering from long Covid, for those who lost loved ones from other diseases because the health system could not cope, and for children and students who missed out on a proper education.

The wonderful Covid wall on the other side of the Thames is, to me, a regular reminder of that dreadful time and today's debate has rightly been touched with emotion. I was particularly struck by the speech from my noble friend Lady Fraser of Craigmaddie on the appalling experience of those with cerebral palsy. There is a lot to learn from such examples.

However, I would emphasise the point my noble friend Lord Evans of Rainow made in his opening remarks that most countries and the World Health Organization itself were ill-prepared for the devastation of Covid-19. I know that is something that my noble friend Lord Kamall would have said had he not been absent—assailed, I have to tell the House, by the prickles of a vicious sea urchin in the Indian Ocean, which means that he is not with us today for this important debate.

I will try to focus on the report but, first, I was sorry that in her critical introduction the noble Baroness, Lady Tyler of Enfield, did not give any credit for what the Government did right; for example, the success of the Vaccine Taskforce, which was mentioned by the noble Lord, Lord Bilimoria. The Government also delivered £400 billion of support—more than almost any other country—which protected jobs, businesses, livelihoods and our cultural and sports institutions. The legacy of this expenditure has been an economic challenge for Governments ever since and we need to learn lessons from that for the future.

I think we need to be open to challenging ourselves. I think that has been the spirit of this debate from all quarters, including from my noble friend Lord Hannan about Sweden and its positive comparative mortality figures and the need to be proportionate.

I am therefore glad that the report stresses the importance of learning lessons from experience and suggests, rightly, that government and the Civil Service do not always do this well. I was struck by the failure to follow through on the Korean and Taiwanese experience of MERS—that is in paragraph 5.27—following Exercise Alice in 2016. Their work on border restrictions, contact tracing and quarantining might have prepared us better. My noble friend Lord Lansley made a similar point and the noble Baroness, Lady Brinton, also referred, rightly, to that useful experience.

A chord was also struck with me by the inquiry's comments on the deleterious effect of the Civil Service's bureaucracy—that is in chapter 5, page 129. I very much recognise this problem of bureaucracy from my own experience as a Minister.

However, I want to demur from one term used in the inquiry's summary. It states in terms on page 2 of the report:

"The UK prepared for the wrong pandemic".

That statement gives an unfortunate and misleading impression, because readers will assume that the efforts made to prepare for an influenza epidemic were mistaken. Nothing could be further from the truth. As the experience of 1919 showed, influenza can be a terrible disease which leads to a substantial number of deaths, including among young people—unlike Covid—so let me offer a maxim: deaths of young people are even more devastating than those of old people. Hence preparing for an influenza epidemic was not wrong, as the inquiry suggests. It was right and it was supported by government and most of the scientists. However, it was not sufficient, as the inquiry reasonably goes on to suggest. More should have been done to prepare for different diseases by building, I would argue, on what had been done in Asia.

[BARONESS NEVILLE-ROLFE]

I was also concerned by some of the omissions in the report. In particular, there is very little on cost-benefit and its role in making the right choices in emergencies. Some of us on these Benches suggested during the epidemic that much more could and should have been done to make proper use of economic tools to determine policy, and to involve economists in the many expert groups. I was therefore impressed by the thoughtful speech of my noble friend Lord Frost, with the benefit of his inside view as a Minister at the centre of government. I hope that it will be studied by the inquiry. I particularly share the concern he expressed that we might not get a proper report on the cost and benefits of all the measures that were taken during the crisis. I hope that the new Government will think about that and respond positively.

There is also less than I expected in the report on the local aspects. I agree with the Minister in her admiration for the many volunteers who put communities ahead of themselves. This was my own experience in my home village of Chilmark. There were many heroes and a terrific role was played by local people, volunteers and local and health authorities of various kinds. Faith groups, mentioned by the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of London, were also important, although personally I was very saddened by the closure of churches during the first lockdown. The noble Baroness, Lady Tyler, also made some useful points about the importance of such different bodies, both in a responsive and preventive capacity, in preparing for future pandemics. My conclusion from reading the report, and from that discussion, is that the inquiry model proposed for the future is too centralised.

This feeds on to some messages for the inquiry as it moves forward with at least eight—yes, eight—more modules. Let us take its new approach: while I agree with the need for better use of experts, feeding back to them properly on the use of their advice and having less groupthink, it is wrong to try to construct a system with so little ministerial input. The inquiry appears to have a degree of distaste for the political process. My own experience is that Ministers—and spads, who are barely mentioned in the report—must work closely with experts. Ministers have to make trade-offs; you cannot expect them easily to accept what are possibly very costly recommendations from an independent statutory body, as proposed by the inquiry. This is especially the case since all experience shows that it is Ministers who bear the brunt of any criticisms. Ministers must be accountable and in control. I also agree with those who have underlined the importance of accountability to Parliament, including the noble Baroness, Lady Thornton, the noble Lord, Lord Reid, and others. In my own experience as a Back-Bencher during Covid, it was very difficult to get Parliamentary Answers and replies out of our Ministers, so I obviously need to take some lessons from the noble Lord, Lord Winston.

On devolution, I agree that there should be a unified system for dealing with serious emergencies, but the UK Government have to take the lead. I am afraid that the inquiry is rather naive here; it assumes that relations between the four Governments ought to and can proceed smoothly, with no indication of how such

a happy state of affairs might be brought about. In particular, it ignores the political grandstanding that was evident during Covid in certain parts of our country. I hope that the inquiry and the Government will pick up what has been said in the debate today in this important area.

The inquiry also needs to be more aware of the cost it has run up. The Library's best estimate is £162 million so far, with £108 million of that by the inquiry itself. There is also the opportunity cost of the top civil servants involved. This needs tackling—budgets need to be spent on solutions. I suspect that the noble Lord, Lord Harris of Haringey, might agree with that.

I was pleased to see the readiness of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to build on what has already been done by the previous Government. We did many things right if you compare our management of Covid-19 with that of some other countries. I think this is because of the strategic decision taken by Ministers to press ahead aggressively with the investment in and the rollout of vaccines—and, indeed, to bring lockdown to an end, in the teeth of opposition from the party opposite.

Since then, as a Government we developed the 2022 resilience framework and the 2023 *UK Biological Security Strategy*, both of which were widely welcomed. In the wake of Covid we made improvements to data handling and cyber risk in research, and to our assessment of pharma and non-pharma interventions. We established a national situation centre in the Cabinet Office, and strengthened our resilience directorate and training operations. We undertook emergency exercises involving all the key players, learning from the military and business. The noble Lord, Lord Whitty, made a good point about detailed preparation on kit, testing and so on. The lead department approach is vital in answering that important question.

It is vital that all of this is carried forward. Is that the Government's intention, or does the review of our national resilience that the CDL has announced presage a completely different approach? That is my first question to the Minister this evening. Secondly, what does the Minister think about the inquiry's proposal for a statutory independent body for whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience? I am, frankly, wary of this, because it could undermine essential ministerial accountability.

The report brings out well the sheer complexity of the multilateral system of providing advice to government on health, science, resilience and preparedness for emergencies. It contrasts with large international companies of the kind I have worked in. It is wasteful and inefficient, and it reduces the productivity of the public sector—a concern which I look forward to debating in the House next month. The report rightly calls the institutions and structures responsible for emergency planning “labyrinthine” in their complexity. This carries huge risks. Thirdly, then, what is the Government's plan to tackle this spaghetti junction of complexity—so well-illustrated in the report's complicated government department maps?

If the Minister is not able to answer my three questions, I hope she will agree either to write or to a meeting. She will know from discussions we have had

before that I am keen to get things right for the future before the next pandemic arrives. Like the noble Lord, Lord Whitty, I have dealt with several, both in the agricultural area and in the medical human area, in my business career. It is really important to learn and implement the lessons of the past so that the future is better. Those who have lost loved ones deserve resolution and to know that we have learned lessons for the future from this devastating pandemic. We need to be challenging and open-minded with ourselves. This report and this debate today have made a very useful start.

8.34 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Baroness Twycross) (Lab):

I thank all noble Lords for their valuable contributions to this important debate on the recent report from the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, for the first module of the UK Covid-19 inquiry, which examines the resilience and preparedness of the United Kingdom from 2009 to early 2020.

As the noble Baroness, Lady Neville-Rolfe, said, the National Covid Memorial Wall sits just over the river from where we sit today. On one of several occasions when I have visited the wall, a friend showed me the heart representing her mother, who she lost to Covid. Each and every one of the more than 220,000 hearts is a poignant reminder of a loved one lost to the virus. Families and friends said goodbye to loved ones in the most difficult circumstances. It was a pandemic that impacted each and every person in the UK. It touched us all, and the impact of Covid remains. I echo my noble friend Lady Merron in giving my heartfelt condolences to all those who lost somebody, who had to say goodbye too soon, or who did not get the chance to say goodbye at all. As the noble Baroness, Lady Brinton, said, those who died included Members of this House.

Those on the front line during the pandemic made an enormous sacrifice, day in, day out, to keep the British public safe, whether in health and social care, education, policing, transport or other front-line services, including fire and rescue services and the military. They came to work every day during a time of national crisis. As my noble friend Lady Chakrabarti said, some people did not have the appropriate protective equipment to keep them safe.

From my former roles as London's Deputy Mayor for Fire and Resilience and chair of the London Resilience Forum, I know the dedication and relentless effort from so many. This included the public, private, voluntary and community sectors, faith groups and individuals, who carried out their essential work as part of the response to the pandemic, as well as businesses that adapted to deliver for their communities. As the noble Lord, Lord Bilimoria, said, they also felt an impact.

Like my noble friend in her opening speech today, I pay tribute to the many key workers who bore the burden of an already strained NHS on their shoulders, delivering services that were overstretched even before the pandemic. We owe a debt of gratitude to these people, and I join other noble Lords from across the House who thanked every single person who kept our country running and selflessly helped others during

this difficult time. Many stepped out of their normal roles, like a librarian I met who worked at a temporary mortuary in London. I do not think that any of us can yet know the long-term mental health impacts of the work they undertook. As the noble Baroness, Lady Tyler, stated so powerfully, many health workers, as well as other key workers, died directly as a result of their work. I am sure that many noble Lords share her justifiable anger on that point.

The health impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic cannot be consigned to the past. Some people in this country are still living with the effects of the virus through long Covid, a condition that one of my sisters has, or still need to shield as they have a higher risk of illness.

A number of noble Lords, including my noble friend Lord Reid and the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of London, highlighted inequalities and the inequalities outcome. I recognise the right reverend Prelate's concerns about the issues around how death and funerals were dealt with, and the pain and distress caused by the lack of appropriate treatment of the deceased. The Government would be keen to engage with community and faith groups in the resilience review so that we can get this and other things right in future.

We do not yet know the full impact of the pandemic, but one thing we can be clear on is that, as the noble Baroness, Lady Tyler, highlighted, the pandemic did not have an equal impact on everyone in the UK. Covid-19 had a disproportionate impact on the lives and livelihoods of ethnic minorities and those already subject to existing health and social inequalities, particularly in the early months of the pandemic. The noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, raised the issues faced by asylum seekers housed in hotels. Those living in overcrowded houses, working in the gig economy or on low incomes also faced disproportionate impacts on their incomes and health. Those with disabilities were also more likely to die, as my noble friend Lady Thornton highlighted. I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Fraser, for her contribution and insight in relation to the specific and shocking experience of people with cerebral palsy, which highlighted the inconsistency around shielding. I would be delighted to arrange a meeting with her to discuss that further.

Children and young people, as a number of noble Lords highlighted, experienced significant disruption to their education and missed out on other opportunities throughout the pandemic in what should have been their formative years. Victims of domestic abuse faced long periods in lockdown with their abusers, isolated from their support networks and often unable to seek help. It is evident that we must improve our preparedness for future pandemics and other risks to protect the most vulnerable.

The findings of this first report from the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, are clearly stated, and inevitably a public inquiry focuses on what needs to be improved. I point out respectfully that the terms of reference in this case were drafted by the former Government. The report finds that the United Kingdom was underprepared for the pandemic that swept across the world in 2020. What preparation there was related to influenza, and this was woefully insufficient. I cannot

[BARONESS TWYCCROSS]

accept the view of the noble Lord, Lord Frost, that the report is incorrect in stating that what planning there was, was for the wrong pandemic. I agree with the noble Lord, Lord Evans, who I do not think is in his place, that we need a cross-party solution, but, like others, I was slightly surprised that he did not acknowledge that a Conservative Government were in charge.

The lack of preparation could be seen across a range of areas: an under-resourced resilience system, inadequate medical stockpiles, insufficient data to monitor the situation and understand impacts, response structures which did not adapt quickly enough to the scale of the challenge, and limited frameworks to identify vulnerable groups and support them. I assure your Lordships that ensuring that the UK is prepared for a future pandemic, as well as for the broadest range of potential risks facing our country, is a top priority for this Government, and I would be delighted to meet the noble Baroness opposite to discuss how we can prepare better for the future.

The inquiry has found that there were fundamental shortcomings in the way the state functioned and was structured over many years leading up to the pandemic. It identifies systemic underinvestment and inadequate central control; it concludes that advice was undermined by groupthink, and that there was insufficient external scrutiny in our contingency planning. It also finds that planning for a major emergency such as a pandemic was uneven, and that we were not prepared for an event that would affect every part of life in the UK. Perhaps most importantly, it finds that planning did not take account of the most vulnerable in our society. There was limited understanding of how existing inequalities might be exacerbated by a pandemic, and insufficient data or assessment mechanisms to help fill those gaps. I am afraid I do not entirely agree—I do not really agree at all—with the view of the noble Lord, Lord Hannan, on the Swedish approach. Sweden's public sector and health service had a very different starting point, and Sweden remains a more equal society than the UK, which is important in this context.

It is imperative that the Government now consider the findings and recommendations of the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, in detail, and we have rightly committed to responding to the report within six months of its publication. The risk assessment of the pandemic was raised by my noble friend Lady Thornton and the noble Lord, Lord Lansley. Pandemic influenza was identified as a top risk in the NSRA over the last 20 years, a point that my noble friend Lord Harris also raised. We have worked to address this learning point and acknowledge the work that the noble Baroness, Lady Neville-Rolfe, did to strengthen the UK's resilience framework. Future assessments are based on a broader range of pandemic scenarios, consistent with the inquiry's conclusions, and we maintain a robust resilience framework for new and emerging risks.

I am delighted that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster announced in his Oral Statement on receipt of this report that he will lead an important review of our national resilience, examining the findings of the report of the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, alongside the breadth of the risks facing the UK. This

review will be integral to shaping this Government's approach and ensuring that the whole of the UK is prepared for the full range of risks we face. As the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster set out, he will chair a dedicated Cabinet committee to oversee the Government's review of national resilience.

I know first-hand the importance of partnership working, both locally and nationally, to tackle the wide range of risks our nations face and to protect the communities we serve. The review will rightly bring in the experience and expertise of colleagues in the devolved Governments and local leaders, and a range of other insights across all layers of government, to help us build resilience across the UK. This must and will include representatives from vulnerable communities.

I am confident that this Government will look at previous efforts to improve our preparedness with fresh eyes. This review of our national resilience will include an examination of the changes made by the previous Administration. What is found to be effective will be kept and what is not will be changed. The Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster have both been clear about the need to work collaboratively at a local and national level, including closely with the devolved Governments. A number of noble Lords made this point, including, most creatively, my noble friend Lord Browne. Our collective efforts will ensure the resilience of the whole of the United Kingdom so that we are better prepared for a future pandemic.

I turn to specific points and questions that noble Lords have raised which I have not already covered. I apologise if I do not manage to cover them all. A number of noble Lords, including the noble Lord, Lord Frost, and my noble friend Lord Reid, raised various views of the lockdowns. This Government recognise that the measures introduced were broadly necessary because Covid-19 was a new disease to which the population had no immunity. As someone who in my previous role took a significant role in the response in London, I have no doubt that the first lockdown prevented the collapse of the NHS. To be clear, the lockdown saved lives. However, it is for the inquiry to determine whether the decisions over further lockdowns were appropriate and timely and to advise on lessons for the future. I look forward to debates around this on future modules.

The noble Lords, Lord Frost and Lord Evans, and my noble friend Lord Harris raised points around government structures and the important issue of government resilience structures. As the report acknowledges, the lead government department is effective for the majority of the risks that the UK faces, such as flooding, terrorism and disease outbreaks. However, it concludes that more centralised leadership from the Cabinet Office is required for whole-system risks such as those we saw with the pandemic. We will carefully consider how the model can be improved as part of the resilience review.

The noble Lord, Lord Frost, my noble friend Lord Harris and the noble Baroness, Lady Neville-Rolfe, raised the inquiry's view on a cross-government forum or stand-alone agency. After consideration of this point, it did not recommend creating an independent statutory body. The Prime Minister's new council of

the regions and nations will and should provide a forum to ensure that leaders across the UK can discuss all issues, including planning and preparation for major incidents, more effectively and collaboratively.

My noble friend Lady O'Grady asked about industrial relations. I acknowledge the important role she played in liaising with the Government on the furlough scheme. It is important that we recognise that. This Government are committed to open dialogue with trade unions, which will serve to strengthen our security, industrial strategy and underlying resilience. I anticipate that trade unions will also be involved in the resilience review, where they wish to be.

The noble Baroness, Lady Tyler, asked about the resilience of public services and low spending. I thank her for her comments on government spending and our public spending inheritance, which means that decisions on spend must be carefully considered as part of the spending review process set out by the Chancellor. The UK resilience review will inform the Government's approach to spending on resilience and we would welcome views from across your Lordships' House—we really do want everyone to put in their views.

My noble friend Lord Browne raised pertinent points about the need for parliamentary and local accountability. It would be wrong not to acknowledge the work of noble Lords, including my noble friend Lady Thornton and the noble Baroness, Lady Brinton, in holding the Government of the day to account during the pandemic, in the most bizarre of circumstances.

On parliamentary accountability more generally, we recognise the previous Government's effort to increase transparency on resilience, both through the publication of key risk information and the former Deputy Prime Minister's Statement to Parliament on resilience. The review will look at where we can go further to raise the profile of risk and resilience. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has committed to responding fully to the Covid-19 inquiry's module 1 report within six months of its publication, in line with the chair's timeframes.

Local level accountability was raised by my noble friend Lord Browne. I am clear that accountability between our institutions and the communities they serve is of great importance. MHCLG is committed to restoring real power to the hands of local places and communities through further English devolution.

The noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, asked whether the report of the APPG on Modern Languages would be considered as part of the Government's review. I can confirm that this will be the case.

A number of noble Lords rightly raised the inquiry's concern about groupthink. We will consider a broad range of internal and external evidence as we review our approach to resilience, because this is absolutely key. The review will rightly consider lessons learned through previous inquiries, such as the Manchester Arena Inquiry, as well as findings in the Grenfell Tower Inquiry's phase 2 report, which is being published tomorrow, that have a bearing on resilience. I noted with interest my noble friend Lord Whitty's point about previous issues, such as those around foot and

mouth disease, and the fact that we repeatedly manage to forget lessons that we say we have learned. We have to find a way forward so that this does not happen in the future.

The resilience review will be undertaken in conversation with the devolved Governments and local leaders, as well as with other people from across the system who are affected by the issues and risks that we face.

On training, the Government recognise the importance of training and exercises. The national exercise programme will continue to test our readiness to respond to risks. The Government launched their crisis management excellence programme in May 2023 and will establish the UK resilience academy in April next year.

My noble friend Lord Winston highlighted trust as one of the overarching issues that we need to address: trust in government, in vaccines produced so quickly, and, from my own perspective, in the authorities generally, which was really harmed through the onslaught of systematic misinformation. Trust was raised by the Prime Minister at his first Cabinet meeting. This is a key priority for this Government, but, as politicians, it must be a collective priority. I know that it is a priority for noble Lords from across your Lordships' House. The point of the noble Baroness, Lady Brinton, on the benefit of trust in the Swedish and Taiwanese cultures, was well made.

The noble Baroness, Lady Brinton, also asked what success would look like. I think success would be an approach to resilience that is reflective of the characteristics of the whole of the UK, and one that seeks to ensure that everybody has improved resilience. Success would be a system in which many of these issues have been resolved. A robust resilience framework to respond to a crisis has to be suitable for all parts of the UK, engaging with all levels of government, the devolved Administrations and local leaders, so that, collectively, we are working together to keep everyone in all parts of the UK safe from the full range of risks that we face.

This report is not just about past failures; it is a stark warning for the future. In conclusion, the noble and learned Baroness, Lady Hallett, is clear that it is not a question of if another pandemic strikes but when. We need to be vigilant, prepared and agile. This is why the Government are taking a long-term, whole-of-government approach to strengthening our national resilience. I have mentioned the resilience review, which I am keen for people to get involved in. We have a solemn duty that goes beyond this Chamber to the people we serve, to the memory of all those who were lost in the pandemic, to those who delivered the response, including health workers and other emergency service personnel, and to all the people living in the UK now and in the future. We must ensure that this country is better prepared. That is a commitment of this Government. We will do whatever we can to strengthen this country's resilience.

Motion agreed.

House adjourned at 8.54 pm.

