

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson) [V]

Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I am delighted to be joining the House in the 60th anniversary edition of Prime Minister's Question Time, which, as you have rightly just pointed out, was an innovation introduced under Harold Macmillan. I look forward to answering colleagues' questions today.

Before the House rises for summer recess tomorrow, I know that everyone will want to join me in thanking parliamentary and constituency staff, and the dedicated House of Commons staff, for their hard work over the last year. I hope very much that everyone has a restful break.

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

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con)

I echo the Prime Minister's thanks to all our staff for their hard work this last year.

I very much welcome the Government's levelling-up agenda to ensure that opportunity and economic freedoms are enjoyed by every person across our four nations. Hastings and Rye is being held back, prevented from achieving its potential largely or partly due to a lack of transport infrastructure. Will my right hon. Friend promise to consider the business case for the HS1 extension from Ashford through to Hastings, Bexhill and Eastbourne, and commit to the funding necessary?

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend is a fantastic advocate for the people of Hastings and Rye, and she has made the case to me before for the improvement to transport that she recommends. I know that this particular extension is being reviewed by the Department for Transport right now, and a decision will be made in due course. I am told that I simply cannot anticipate that, but what I can say is that this is the Government and the party that is absolutely determined to level up across our country with better infrastructure, superb innovation, and better skills across the whole of the UK.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab)

Thank you, Mr Speaker, and all the House of Commons staff, for everything you have done to keep Parliament open and safe.

Can I wish the Prime Minister - the Chequers one - well in his isolation? With half a million people self-isolating, I think we were all a bit surprised that the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Cabinet Office Minister were all randomly chosen for a “get out of isolation free” card, but it is good that the Prime Minister finally recused himself, even if it took a public outcry, for the Communities Secretary to be humiliated on live TV, and a trip to a country estate.

If someone is pinged by the NHS app, as millions will be over coming weeks, should they isolate - yes or no?

The Prime Minister

Yes is the answer to that, and I think that everybody understands the inconvenience of being pinged. As the right hon. and learned Gentleman rightly says, here I am - I wish I was with Members in the Commons Chamber today. I apologise to everybody in business up and down the land and in all kinds of services, public sector or otherwise, who is experiencing inconvenience. We will be switching, as the House knows, to a system based on contact testing, rather than contact isolation, but until then I must remind everybody that isolation is a vital tool in our defence against the disease. You are five times more likely to catch it if you have been in contact with someone who has it. Even if you have been vaccinated, you can still pass it on, although that risk is reduced. The overwhelming argument is for getting a jab. Everybody should get a jab.

Keir Starmer

The Prime Minister says that everyone understands the Government’s position as to what they should do if they are pinged by the NHS app. That is a very interesting answer, because the Government are all over the place on this. Yesterday, his Business Minister, Lord Grimstone, said that the app was an “advisory tool” only. Another Government Minister - I kid you not - said yesterday that the app is just

“to allow you to make informed decisions.”

What on earth does that mean? Of course, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor spent the weekend trying to dodge isolation altogether. The British people are trying to follow the rules, but how can they do so when his Ministers keep making them up as they go along?

The Prime Minister

No. If I may, Mr Speaker, I will laboriously repeat the answer that I gave earlier to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, just to get it into his head yet again.

Isolation is a very important part of our armoury against Covid. We are going forward, as everyone knows, to a new system on 16 August based on testing, but in the meantime, when you are advised to isolate to protect others and to protect your family against the spread of disease, you should do so.

Even more important than the isolation campaign is, of course, the vaccination campaign. Some 3 million people of the 18-to-30 group are still to get one. I think the right hon. and learned Gentleman's time would be more usefully employed, if I may so, in encouraging everybody to get vaccinated.

Keir Starmer

Everything may be calm from the Prime Minister's country retreat, but back here the truth is that we are heading for a summer of chaos. [Interruption.] There is a lot of noise, Mr Speaker; I hope they have all got their NHS app on. We are heading for a summer of chaos. One million children were out of school last week - 1 million - and a huge number of businesses are closing because so many staff are self-isolating.

Let me turn to the question of exemptions. Yesterday, the messages coming out of No. 10 about which businesses and workers might be exempt from isolation changed hour by hour. First, there was going to be a list, then there wasn't. Then the Prime Minister's spokesperson said:

“We're not seeking to draw lines specifically around who or who is not exempt.”

I have read that, and I have reread it several times, and I haven't a clue what it means. The Road Haulage Association hit the nail on the head when it said that the plan was

“thought up on the hoof without proper organisation or thought”.

I know that the Prime Minister likes to govern by three-word slogans, and I think “on the hoof” might work pretty well. This is the last chance before recess. [Interruption.] For millions of workers, this matters.

Mr Speaker

Order. Mr Gullis, I do not need any help or assistance from you. The next time you point to your watch, it might be better looking at Big Ben outside, rather than here. Come on.

Keir Starmer

This is the last chance before recess. Can the Prime Minister just clear it up - which workers and which businesses will be exempt from isolating before 16 August?

The Prime Minister

I think this is pretty feeble stuff from the right hon. and learned Gentleman on what is going to be a glorious 60th anniversary edition of PMQs. I have given him the answer in a letter that he had earlier on about the businesses and the sectors of industry that we think it would be sensible now to exempt. But he cannot have it both ways. He attacks the self-isolation system, but as far as I understand the position of the right hon. and learned Gentleman when it comes to the road map, he actually now, this week, opposes going forward with Step 4, as we did on Monday. He wants to keep this country, as far as I understand his position, in lockdown. Now, which is it? He cannot have it both ways. He cannot simultaneously attack -

Mr Speaker

Order. Sorry, Prime Minister, just a moment. We are really struggling on the sound level. I do not know whether we can have the sound level turned up to hear the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister

Oh, I am sorry.

Mr Speaker

Thank you, Prime Minister. You have a great stand-in, who is quite desperate, but I want to hear this Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister

Do you want me to have another go, Mr Speaker? Hang on a moment, is it this thing here?

Mr Speaker

Prime Minister, I can hear you quite well. People have decided to be quite rowdy, but I can hear you now. Continue from halfway through the answer.

The Prime Minister

Can you hear me, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker

I can hear you loud and clear, Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister

Do you want me to give that answer again, Mr Speaker? [Hon. Members: “No!”]

Mr Speaker

No, do not worry - just complete the end bit.

The Prime Minister

I am very happy to. I will repeat it. I will say it as many times as you like, Mr Speaker.

I think that the right hon. and learned Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition is guilty of failing to listen to what I said just now, and it is perfectly obvious that, as I said to him in a letter earlier on, there are some businesses and some parts of our economy that of course need exemptions from the isolation regime because they need to be able to carry on, and for the most part, obviously, people will have to follow the rules. We are changing it on 16 August, by which time we will have vaccinated many more people.

I understand people’s frustrations, but this is one of the few real tools that we have in our armoury against the virus. I really think that in attacking the isolation system, which is what I think the right hon. and learned Gentleman is doing, he is being totally inconsistent with his earlier announcement, which seemed to be that we should stay in lockdown. If I understand the position of the Labour party now, which is different from last week, it does not want to go ahead with Step 4. I think I am right in that.

Keir Starmer

The Prime Minister talks about inconsistency - two hours and 38 minutes to do a massive U-turn on Sunday morning, and then what have we seen in the last few days. He says I did not listen to his answer. I did listen, and I still think he is making it up. We had a completely unclear announcement on Monday about exemptions. We had contradictory statements all day yesterday. Now we seem to be back to the confused policy of Monday. How on earth are businesses meant to plan when the Prime Minister keeps chopping and changing like this?

I have to say that, even after 15 months of these exchanges, I cannot believe that the Prime Minister does not see the irony of him spending Freedom Day locked in

isolation and announcing plans for a vaccine ID card. I remember when he used to say he would eat an ID card if he ever had to produce one, and now he is introducing them. When it comes to creating confusion, the Prime Minister is a super-spreader, so let me try to get some clarity. Why is it okay for someone to go to a nightclub for the next six weeks without proof of a vaccine or a test, and then from September it will only be okay to get into a nightclub if they have a vaccine ID card?

The Prime Minister

The Labour leader traditionally has a choice in a national crisis, and that is whether to get behind the Government and to offer constructive opposition, or to try endlessly to oppose for the sake of it and to try to score cheap political points. Everybody can see that we have to wait until the end of September - by which time, this is only fair to the younger generation, they will all have been offered two jabs - before we consider something like asking people to be double-jabbed before they go into a nightclub. That is blindingly obvious to everybody. It is common sense, and I think most people in this country understand it. Most people in this country want to see the younger generation encouraged to get vaccinations. That is what, with great respect to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, he should be doing, rather than trying endlessly to score what I think are vacuous political points.

Keir Starmer

The Prime Minister keeps asking me if I will support his chaos: no, and I want to bring the Prime Minister back to one of our earlier exchanges in this House. On 26 May I asked the Prime Minister if he had ever

“used the words ‘Covid is only killing 80-year-olds’ or words to that effect”.

On that day the Prime Minister pointedly did not deny using those words, and now we have the proof that he did. We have all now seen the Prime Minister’s text message: “The median age” of Covid fatalities

“is 82 ... That is above life expectancy”,

and we have the Prime Minister’s conclusion in the same text:

“So get Covid and live longer.”

I remind the Prime Minister that more than 83,000 people aged 80 or over lost their lives to this virus, every one leaving behind a grieving family and loved ones. So will the Prime Minister now apologise for using those words?

The Prime Minister

Nothing I can say from this Dispatch Box - or this virtual Dispatch Box, I should say - and nothing I can do can make up for the loss and suffering that people have endured throughout this pandemic, and there will of course be a public inquiry into what has happened, but I would just remind the right hon. and learned Gentleman when he goes back over the decision-making processes that we had in those very difficult and dark times that there are incredibly tough balancing decisions that we have to take: we have to balance the catastrophe of the disease against the suffering caused by lockdowns - the impacts on mental health, the loss of life chances for young people. What has changed since we were thinking in those ways is of course that we have rolled out vaccines faster than any other country in Europe: 96% of people over 50 will now have had a vaccine, and 68% of people have had two jabs. What we are trying to say to the country today - the single most important, serious message - is, "If you have not yet had your second jab, please come along and get it, and if you're over 50 and still have not had a second jab or over 40, please come and get it as well." And we must never forget that if we had followed the advice of the right hon. and learned Gentleman we would have stayed in the European Medicines Agency and would never have had the vaccine roll-out at all.

Keir Starmer

I think we might have to check that the line to Chequers is working, because the Prime Minister's answers bear no resemblance to the questions I am asking him. He has given us a list of what he cannot do; what he can do - quite straightforwardly, virtually or otherwise - is say sorry.

The trouble is that nobody believes a word the Prime Minister says any more. He promised he had a plan for social care, but he has ducked it for two years. He promised not to raise tax, but now he is planning a jobs tax. He promised he would not cut the Army or the aid budget; he has cut both. He also promised that Monday would be Freedom Day; he said 18 times from the Dispatch Box that it would be irreversible, but the truth is that he has let a new variant into the country, he has let cases soar, and he has left us with the highest death toll in Europe and one of the worst-hit economies of any major economy. Last week a million kids were off school, businesses are closing, and millions will spend their summer self-isolating. But don't worry, Mr Speaker, the Prime Minister has got it

all under control, because this morning we read that he has a new three-word slogan. "Keep life moving" - you couldn't make it up. Isn't it clear that there are only three words this Prime Minister needs to focus on: "Get a grip"?

The Prime Minister

Let us look at the position as it was at the end of last year, and as we come to the end of this parliamentary term let us be absolutely clear that it is thanks to the vaccine roll-out - which, by the way, I never tire of repeating, would have been impossible if we had followed the right hon. and learned Gentleman's advice - that 9 million people have now come off furlough, unemployment is 2 million lower than predicted, job vacancies are 10% higher than before the pandemic began, and business insolvencies are lower than before the pandemic began.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman wants three-word slogans; I will give him a three-word slogan. Our three-word slogan is "Get a job" - and by the way, we are also helping people to get a job. We are turning jabs, jabs, jabs into jobs, jobs, jobs. That is the agenda of this Government. By taking sensible, cautious decisions and rolling out the vaccines in the way that we have, we have been able to get this country moving and to keep it moving.

I have listened to the right hon. and learned Gentleman very carefully this morning. I have absolutely no idea what he proposes to do instead, except keep us all in some sort of perpetual lockdown and limbo. He has no answer to the question, "If not now, when?" He has no plan, he has no ideas and he has no hope, while we in this Government are getting on with getting our country through the pandemic and delivering on the people's priorities.

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con)

The levelling-up fund is a very welcome investment in Montgomeryshire. It is a game changer for our county council and critical investment at this critical time. Specifically, we would like to reopen the Montgomery canal - that is our levelling-up bid. Sadly, it was disconnected from the UK network some decades ago and it is being kept alive by a terrific team of volunteers. Will the Prime Minister use the weight of his office and, like the Secretary of State for Wales, jump on the boat, get this investment over the waterline and deliver this levelling-up bid in mid-Wales?

The Prime Minister

I congratulate my hon. Friend on the campaign he is running for what sounds like an absolutely beautiful plan to reopen the Montgomery canal. He will not have

long to wait for the decision on that scheme, but I can assure him that Wales is receiving thumping quantities of the UK's levelling-up fund already; 5% of total UK allocations in the first round will be in Wales. I thank him for the lobbying that he has put in today.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP)

Of course, while they are talking about levelling up on the Government Benches, we in Scotland are looking at settling up for the people of Scotland.

I hope the Prime Minister will be reflecting on the judgment from the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman yesterday, which judged that there was “maladministration” in dealing with the 1950s WASPI women - the Women Against State Pension Inequality. It is about time that the Government delivered justice for those involved.

Last night, we heard from the Prime Minister's former chief of staff that, on 15 October, the Prime Minister did not believe that the NHS would be overwhelmed and thought that the over-80s should be sacrificed to the whims of the deadly virus. The Prime Minister wrote those words while our NHS was facing the darkest moments in its history. While doctors and nurses were fighting to contain the pandemic, the Prime Minister was actively pushing for the virus to be allowed to run rampant through towns and cities. The Prime Minister was willing, in his own words, to allow the bodies to “pile high”.

On 15 October 2020, 60,000 people had already died. How can anyone have put faith and trust in a Prime Minister who actually typed the words

“get Covid and live longer”?

The Prime Minister

I think that the right hon. Gentleman grossly mischaracterises the substance of those discussions - what I said. I have made points in the House of Commons already - in the Chamber - about the language that I am alleged to have used. But I think what everybody in this country understands is that the decisions that we had to take at that time were incredibly difficult. Of course, this in no way detracts from the grief and suffering of those who have lost loved ones to Covid and whose families have been hit by the consequences of that disease, but as I said earlier to the Labour leader, we have to balance very, very difficult harms on either side. There are no good ways through; a lockdown also causes immense suffering and loss of life chances, and damage to health and mental health.

The right hon. Gentleman knows very well that, in due course, there will be a chance to look at all this in a full public inquiry, but I must tell the House that I am content that we followed the scientific guidance and we did whatever we could to save life and to minimise suffering, and of course to protect our wonderful NHS.

Ian Blackford

My goodness, is that it? Is that it, Prime Minister? The reality is that the Prime Minister wrote these words himself. The over-80s were expendable. A Prime Minister is charged with protecting society, not putting folk at risk of an early death. Such a glib attitude towards human life is indefensible. The Prime Minister is simply not fit for office.

The clear pattern throughout this pandemic is that it is one rule for them and another rule for the rest of us. The reality is that the only way to get to the full truth over the UK Government's disastrous handling of the pandemic is for this cabal to be made to answer under oath. Will the Prime Minister confirm that, in the interests of public health and confidence, the Covid inquiry will begin immediately, and will he commit to appearing at the inquiry himself under oath before any general election is called?

The Prime Minister

I appreciate why it is so important for this country to have a full public inquiry and that is why I made the announcement to the House that we would. I also think it is right that it should go ahead as soon as is reasonable. I do not think that right now, in the middle of a third wave when we are seeing many of the key people involved in fighting the pandemic very heavily occupied, it is right to ask them to devote a lot of their time to a public inquiry of the kind that I think we would all want to see. That is why I think it is right that it should start in the spring, when I am pretty confident, and so are the rest of the scientific community, that we will really be in a much, much better position and able to go ahead. That is the time to begin the public inquiry, but that does not mean that we are not continuing to learn lessons all the time.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con) [V]

Forty years ago, this country led the world in social mobility. Since then, we have fallen so far behind we are now only 21st in the world rankings. If we are to succeed at levelling up the UK, we must restore social mobility for working-class pupils right across the country. The fastest and most cost-effective way to do that is to re-engineer the classroom to capitalise on the benefits of modern technology,

using artificial intelligence to provide lessons tailored to the ability of each and every child. Countries around the world are already doing this, from America to Australia, China to Estonia. Private schools in the UK, including Eton, are already doing it using world-class British technology. Will the Prime Minister undertake to use modern technologies to give every working-class child the opportunity to reach their full potential - opportunity based on their abilities, not on where they grew up or how rich their parents were?

The Prime Minister

Yes, and I am thankful to my right hon. Friend for the personal tutorial he gave me, using a laptop, in the opportunities provided by this type of technology and the massive increase in the cognitive powers of kids that is now made possible by these types of technology. We are looking at supporting schools across the whole of the UK with this kind of advance as we continue to level up.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP)

In light of the judicial ruling in the High Court that the Northern Ireland protocol repeals article 6 of the Act of Union, which allows for unimpeded trade within the United Kingdom and between the constituent parts of the UK, what does the Prime Minister intend to do to fully restore the Act of Union for Northern Ireland and remove the Irish sea border?

The Prime Minister

I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. This is my first opportunity publicly to congratulate him on becoming leader of the Democratic Unionist party. I look forward to working with him and with the whole of the Executive in Northern Ireland for the people in Northern Ireland. As we have made clear and as we will be setting out today, we want to sort out the issues in the protocol. We think there are practical steps we can take to do that. As far as the court case is concerned, nothing in the protocol affects the territorial integrity of the United Kingdom or Northern Ireland's place within it.

Mr Speaker

Let us see if we can pick up the pace.

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con) [V]

Last Friday, I joined local health officials and members of the public at a consultation meeting on maternity services in Staffordshire. Maternity was temporarily suspended at Stafford's County Hospital at the height of the pandemic so that wards could be used to treat Covid-19 patients. Does my right hon. Friend

agree that anyone who wants to give birth at Stafford's County Hospital should be able to do so?

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend raises a very important point. Many of the hospitals that I have been round recently are doing incredible work at getting back to pre-Covid levels of service. I understand that NHS partners are working hard to explore options for restoring maternity services at County Hospital.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab)

Together, the Chairs of the Committees dealing with social security in the Scottish Parliament, the Senedd and the Northern Ireland Assembly and I have made a call that the £20 a week cut in universal credit due in October should not go ahead. A new Joseph Rowntree Foundation Report shows that if it does go ahead, out-of-work families with children will have an income way below what the general public regard as the minimum necessary for an acceptable standard of living. Instead of cutting down, will the Prime Minister not follow his own policy, level up and leave the £20 a week in place?

The Prime Minister

What we want to do is level up across the whole of the UK by increasing access to high-wage, high-skilled jobs and by getting people off benefits and into work. That really is the big difference between the right hon. Member's party and the party that I lead. We want to help people into work, but I am afraid that, as so often, Labour wants to keep them on welfare. I do not think that is the right way forward. We want to see higher wages, which is why we have increased the living wage by record amounts, and we are working to ensure that this is a jobs-led recovery. All the signs at the moment are that that is succeeding, but of course it depends on people getting those jobs when they are asked to.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con) [V]

I welcome the cautious move to Step 4 this week, which was made possible only due to the fantastic vaccine roll-out in South Leicestershire and across our country and the fact that every adult has now been offered the vaccine. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if we do not move forward now, we risk opening up later in the autumn or winter, when the NHS is under more pressure and children have returned to school? That seems to be Labour's reckless approach.

The Prime Minister

That is spot on - my hon. Friend is completely right. The question for those who attack the current policy is: "If not now, when?" We looked at the data this morning with the chief medical officer, and he pointed out the extraordinary difference between the number of people in the older generations being hospitalised now and in previous waves. Thanks to the vaccine roll-out, we have radically changed the way the disease affects our society. It is that change that is enabling us to make the progress that we are. As he says, "if not now, when?"

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab) [V]

The Government claim that fires in schools are very rare and are mostly confined to one room or cause little or no damage. The fire last month at Asmall Primary School in my constituency spread far beyond the original site and severely damaged three rooms. That has had a devastating effect on the school, and the pupils now face 18 months of disruption to their education. Will the Prime Minister commit to a mandate that all new build schools and major refurbishments are installed with sprinklers so that schools do not suffer the same fate as Asmall Primary in Ormskirk?

The Prime Minister

I thank the hon. Lady very much and I thank the fire service for its outstanding response to the fire at Asmall Primary School. I am sorry for the disruption that children are experiencing. We cannot be complacent about fires at all, let alone fires in schools, and the Department for Education is consulting on guidance to improve fire safety in schools further. I encourage her to make representations in that consultation.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind)

One of my constituents recently attempted to sell a house, only for the surveyor and estate agent to inform him that they require an external wall system certificate. However, under the current Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors guidance, an EWS1 form should not be expected for properties and buildings under 18 metres high, which includes my constituent's property in Cambuslang. Will the Prime Minister clarify whether the UK Government intend to take any steps to ensure that lenders and others adhere to RICS guidance on EWS1 forms and will he meet me to discuss how I can assist my constituent?

The Prime Minister

The hon. Lady makes an extremely important point. That is why my right hon. Friend the Housing Secretary will make a statement to the House shortly. We must

be clear that the risk from fire to life in homes is very, very low and leaseholders should not be trapped in their properties, unable to buy or sell, because their properties have been unfairly maligned in that way. Lenders and valuers should not be asking for EWS1 forms on buildings below 18 metres. The Housing Secretary will set out later more about how we propose to ensure that that does not happen.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con)

Dame Vera Lynn did so much for our nation and now a fitting memorial is planned on the white cliffs of Dover to ensure that this national icon continues to be celebrated for decades to come. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Dame Vera was a great inspiration to women, showing the difference we can make and contributing throughout the whole of her life to our national life? Will he extend his support to this important Dame Vera Lynn national memorial project?

Mr Speaker

Prime Minister, I think we can all unite.

The Prime Minister

Yes, Mr Speaker, I think this is a pretty safe bet for everybody. We all remember and love the songs of Dame Vera Lynn. She brought the whole country together at a pretty dark time and is a great, great inspiration for many, many people. I thank my hon. Friend for the campaign that she is leading for a fitting memorial and I am very happy to support it.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab)

Since July 2019, the Department for Work and Pensions has undertaken 124 internal process reviews following the deaths of 97 claimants and 27 where claimants suffered serious harm - a threefold increase since 2012. Not once was this mentioned in the health and disability Green Paper published last night. Many believe that this is just the tip of the iceberg and many also believe that the Government can no longer keep marking their own homework. We need to understand the true scale and causes of these deaths in an independent public inquiry, so will the Prime Minister meet me and the delegation of bereaved relatives to discuss this?

The Prime Minister

I thank the hon. Lady very much; I hope the House will forgive me if I say that I did not catch every word of what she said, but I believe that she was referring to the tragic deaths of those who were claiming benefits. I am certainly determined to

make sure that she gets a full account of what we are doing to put this right and that she meets the relevant Minister as soon as that can be arranged.

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con)

Last week, I met one of Truro's daffodil farmers. There is real concern in the industry that they will not be able to have their daffodil pickers in the fields this January. I know that the DWP is working with the Duchy College and is hoping to run a local sector-based work academy, but this is a complex issue requiring a long-term solution. I wonder whether my right hon. Friend would meet me and other Cornish MPs to see how we could resolve this in the long term.

The Prime Minister

I am only too happy to meet my hon. Friend at any time. I can assure her that we want to find the workforce to pick the flowers - the beautiful Cornish daffodils - that should not be "born to blush unseen", if I remember the quote right. They should be properly picked. In addition to developing the local labour force, and making sure that we line up younger people and people across Cornwall with the opportunities that there are, she must not forget that, thanks to the EU settlement scheme, there are 6 million EU nationals still entitled to live and work in this country, who have taken advantage of that scheme. Never let it be said that we have done an injustice to that group.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab)

Local residents in Lancaster are opposing the conversion of a popular local pub, the Britannia, into a 10-bedroom student let. The Housing Secretary says that the current planning system does not give people influence over local developments, but his party's developers' charter gags local residents and hands power to a Whitehall-appointed board of developers, resulting in low quality, unaffordable housing. Is it not the case that the Prime Minister is paying back his party of developer paymasters by selling out local communities?

The Prime Minister

I do not think that I have heard such total cobblers in all my life, except possibly from the Leader of the Opposition. That is not what the Bill does. On the contrary, it gives local people the power to protect.

If I understood the hon. Lady correctly, it was a pub called the Britannia that she wanted to protect. We are bringing forward measures to allow local people to protect such places of vital local importance. When it comes to development, the power remains vested firmly with local people, to make sure that they protect

their green spaces and the green belt, and they have development only in the places where they, the local people, want it.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con)

I am sure that my right hon. Friend is not surprised that people are keen to move to my North Devon constituency, but we, like much of the south-west, are experiencing severe housing shortages. Local government need urgent help and support now. Might he consider, as part of planning reforms, binding covenants being applied to a proportion of new-build housing, so it is used as a primary residence and not a holiday let or second home, and that existing homes must register for a change of use if they become a holiday let, to ensure vibrant coastal communities do not become winter ghost towns?

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend is a massively effective advocate for the people of North Devon. She has made these points to me before, and I know that she is right. As she knows, we have put higher rates of stamp duty on the buying of additional property, such as second homes, but we also have to make sure that young people growing up around our country - contrary to the instincts of the previous Labour speaker, the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) - have the chance of home ownership in the place where they live. That is what our first home scheme will help to do, with a new discount of at least 30% prioritised for first-time buyers.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab)

The Prime Minister is having to self-isolate, as are hundreds of thousands of people across the country because of his reckless Covid strategy. Unlike the Prime Minister, not everybody has been able to run off to a luxury country mansion with a heated swimming pool. Also, unlike the Prime Minister, so many people across our country are having to survive on just £96 sick pay per week. Could the Prime Minister survive on £96 sick pay per week? If he could not, why does he think that it is good enough for everyone else?

The Prime Minister

The hon. Gentleman is quite wrong, because everybody who is self-isolating is entitled, in addition to the equivalent of the living wage at statutory sick pay, to help, in extreme circumstances, from their local councils and to a £500 payment to help them with self-isolation. It remains absolutely vital that everybody does it.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con) [V]

Given the global pandemic, public criticism of my right hon. Friend's extraordinary leadership should be dismissed. He put the lives of my constituents first, and has had to adapt to the lessons that Covid-19 has taught us. Sadly, the same cannot be said of the handling of tuberculosis by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Will he meet me to discuss the current TB strategy and how we can improve it?

The Prime Minister

I am always delighted to meet my hon. Friend. I listened to him and learned from him about bovine TB and badgers. We think that the badger cull has led to a reduction in the disease, but no one wants to continue, and I am sure that he does not, with the cull of a protected species - beautiful mammals - indefinitely, so it is a good thing that we are accelerating other elements of our strategy, particularly vaccination. I think that is the right way forward, and we should begin, if we can, to phase out badger culling in this country.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD)

One million children, including my daughter, were out of school last week due to the need to self-isolate when a positive test is confirmed in their bubble. May I first pay tribute to all the teachers both in my constituency and across the country who have done incredible work in keeping learning going under such difficult circumstances? I was really pleased to be able to thank my daughter's schoolteacher in person yesterday. Can the Prime Minister confirm that the Government's approach to managing the pandemic will guarantee that all children will have an uninterrupted academic year when they return to school after the summer break?

The Prime Minister

The hon. Lady is absolutely right to focus on the needs of children in the pandemic and the paramount importance of keeping them in school. We will do everything we can to ensure that we are able to get schools back in September - I have every confidence that we will be able to - but that will be greatly assisted, as I never tire of repeating this afternoon, if everybody goes and gets their second job, or first job.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con)

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on missing children, I know that every year, 180,000 people are reported to the police as missing across our constituencies in the United Kingdom. I am sure that the Prime Minister and

everyone in the House find that completely unacceptable. The Home Office's strategy on missing people has not been reviewed since 2011, so will the Prime Minister please urgently get the strategy reviewed and updated? Along with that, will he meet the Missing People charity, the Children's Society and me to look at this important issue affecting our society?

The Prime Minister

I thank my hon. Friend, and I would just remind him that 95% of missing person incidents are resolved without anyone coming to harm, or without the missing individual coming to harm. I thank him for the work that he does on this issue, because it matters a great deal to the remaining 5%, which is an unacceptably high level of suffering. I am certainly determined that we should continue to work with all the relevant agencies, police and social services to improve our response. I am very happy to take up his offer and ensure that he gets the meeting that he needs.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP)

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for disability, I hosted a Disability Confident workshop for Members of Parliament, and I am delighted that we are now approaching 25% of cross-party MPs being accredited as disability confident employers. Will the Prime Minister become a disability confident employer himself, encourage colleagues to do so, and put his support behind improved representation and inclusion in Parliament for people with disabilities?

The Prime Minister

I thank the hon. Lady very much for her suggestion that the Government should become a Disability Confident employer. I am sure that we already are, but I will investigate the matter and make sure that she gets an answer by letter.

Mr Speaker

I will now stand down your stand-in, Prime Minister. May I just say to everyone that when we get back we have to get through more questions and get back on time? Let us work for one another.

I am suspending the House for a few minutes to enable the necessary arrangements to be made for the next business.

12:49:00

Sitting suspended.