

## House of Commons

### Petition - General Election - Transcript

6 January 2025

16:30:00

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)  
I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 700143 relating to a general election.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. As Chair of the Petitions Committee, I believe I speak for all its members and, I bet, a whole heap of politicians in this Parliament when I say that it is always encouraging to witness public participation in politics. With more than 3 million—3.1 million—signatures, it is evident that this petition has engaged a truly vast number of people all across the country. For that reason, I personally and most sincerely thank its creator, Mr Michael Westwood, who is with us with his wife, Tanya, and whom I had the pleasure of meeting during the run-up to this debate before Christmas, when we had a long chat.

Mr Westwood created this e-petition with a clear and very simple call.  
Michael Westwood

“would like there to be another General Election”

on account of his belief that

“the current Labour Government have gone back on the promises”

they made during the lead-up to the last election, which was held, as we all know, in July 2024. When Michael Westwood and I spoke, Michael explained that his reason for creating this petition came from his personal frustration at the lack of transparency and accountability in our election process. He feels that the system does not ensure that the Government of the day are made answerable for unfulfilled manifesto promises and poor governance. Put simply, Mr Westwood believes that it

is too easy for political parties—all of us—to mislead the public in order to gain their vote. In the case of the current Government, he believes that there is as yet no sign of Labour's pledge to kick-start the economy, even after six months in office.

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD)  
Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jamie Stone  
I give way to my hon. Friend with the greatest pleasure.

Dr Savage  
My hon. Friend has my gratitude. Does he agree that although the Government have committed to growth, increasing national insurance contributions to the extent that small businesses—the lifeblood of our economy—are having to lay off staff is an odd way to go about it?

Jamie Stone  
I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. Indeed, that is one particular matter I shall touch on shortly.

On account of the sheer number of signatories to Michael's petition, it is only reasonable to assume that similar feelings are held by a great number of people currently living in the UK; but before I explore the technicalities of this request for an election, I want to address the purpose of petitions and their significance in our political system as it is today in the UK.

Let us remember that petitions are first and foremost a mechanism of civic engagement and political expression. As individual politicians, each and every one of us resides in this place, in this House, only at the behest of our constituents, and it is surely paramount that a dialogue is always facilitated between us and the public. I say to colleagues that whether we agree or disagree with Mr Westwood's petition, we should not lose sight of the fact that a petition that garners this much support is surely the sign of a healthy democracy. The fact that we are here today, in this place, debating this matter is surely evidence that we live in a democracy in which our electorate can express discontent, demand our attention and know that we will listen to them and take their concerns seriously. Ultimately, we work for all those who put their name to this petition, and I believe that the Government should welcome their

input as a sign that our representative democracy in the UK is alive and well, which is a lot more than can be said for far too many other parts of the world where it is not alive and well at all.

All that said, the petitions system was created to bring to Parliament's attention issues of policy on which there is strong public feeling. It was not ever intended as a mechanism to circumvent parliamentary democracy or change the terms by which it is conducted. Creating a petition is a means of advocacy and participation. A petition is not an autonomous decision-making tool that can act as a substitute for a representative democracy. We need to remember those important principles.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con)  
Does the hon. Gentleman agree, however, that the petition allows the public to express their anger and disappointment at the failure of the Labour Government to deliver on so many pledges, particularly—appositely, given the sub-zero temperatures across Scotland in the last few days—on the withdrawal of the winter fuel payment, when it had been promised that that would be retained?

Jamie Stone

I thank the right hon. Gentleman, my former colleague from the Scottish Parliament. I will touch on that issue shortly. I also invite him to perhaps surmise that petitions are dealt with rather better in this place than in that other place where we once served, but we will leave that aside for the moment.

I will put it very simply: an election cannot be called as a result of a petition. It is a fact that on 4 July, the Labour party won a majority, and they will remain in office for the duration of their term or until the Prime Minister seeks permission from the sovereign to dissolve Parliament at a time of his choosing. That is the way we do things in this country. Furthermore, it is absolutely intrinsic to the proper function of democracy to respect and uphold the democratic mandate that the current Government hold from the British public. I assert that that mandate cannot be overturned by this or any future petition; that would fundamentally undermine the existing institutional constitutional mechanisms that empower the public. The British people had their say in July. They chose the current Government and we must continue to

honour that choice. I believe that is a fundamental principle of the way we do things in this country.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con)

The hon. Gentleman touched on the word "mandate". I think most people would accept and acknowledge that the Government were elected on a mandate for change, but would he agree that one of the reasons why there is so much traction and engagement with this petition, including in my constituency, is that people feel so let down and disappointed? We have seen so many manifesto promises broken already.

Jamie Stone

I accept the point, but I remind the right hon. Lady that I am a servant of the House and have to be an impartial chairman in this matter. I think we all know that that is the way this place works. Tempting though it might be for me to say something, it would be very wrong, but I may touch on some things like that in due course.

It is the case, however, that the Government must respectfully acknowledge the frustration of those who signed the petition and do their utmost to understand the motivation of those good people. In response to the petition, the Cabinet Office reassured the public that it was committed to

"fixing the foundations, rebuilding Britain, and restoring public confidence in government."

In particular, the Cabinet Office cited the "£22 billion black hole" as the reason for the very difficult decisions that have had to be made in the past and will be made in the future. None of them is easy and, in all fairness, we should recognise that.

In recent months we have witnessed widespread dissatisfaction with various policy decisions that the Government have chosen to make, and that has been touched on by hon. Members today. The decisions to cut winter fuel payments, terminate inheritance tax exemptions for farms, and increase national insurance contributions for employers are three that have proved controversial. That is the case in all our constituencies, including mine, regardless of the colour of the Member involved. We know that from the press comment.

I return to our guest here: the man who raised the petition, Mr Michael Westwood. He placed a specific emphasis on economic growth as a motivation for creating the petition, and made his dissatisfaction with the Government's response clear. That is an example of the sort of dialogue that petitions should initiate. I learned something from my discussions with Mr Westwood; I think we can all learn from them. I very much hope that this debate will help the Government address some of the inadequacies that have been identified.

I think I speak for us all when I say that we all want to see an economy where large and small businesses can thrive and prosper. That is what drives the nation. We all want an NHS that is properly funded, so that everyone gets the care they need, and we want a society that has proper safeguards so that the most vulnerable are protected from all the horrors that might come their way, which we should stop as best we can. These are, however, huge ambitions. They are very proper and right ambitions that we should sign up to, but they will be expensive. They are not cheap, and allocating resources fairly will be a challenge for a Government of any colour.

May I be so bold as to suggest that we improve engagement still more? I hope that communication will improve in the months and years ahead of this debate and that the Government can also be involved in that sort of discussion and deliberation. The electorate must be reassured that all of us as their representatives, who are here at their behest, are willing to listen to their needs. I think that any Government would be wrong to assume that they act in a vacuum. Explanations will always be necessary in a democracy as long-standing and robust as ours—one that I believe is the envy of many other parts of the world.

We have a particularly well-attended debate today, which I find, as Chair of the Select Committee, immensely encouraging. I am sure we are going to hear some most interesting and thoughtful contributions. I will draw my remarks to a close, Mrs Harris, and listen with great interest to what follows.

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair)

Order. Before we continue with the debate, can I bring to everyone's attention that guests in the Gallery are not permitted to contribute in any way to it? Any Member who speaks needs to stay for the wind-ups.

We will have a tight time limit of six minutes per speech. Can I please encourage colleagues to make short interventions? Otherwise, some people will not be able to speak. I call Yasmin Qureshi.

16:42:00

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. Petitions in our Parliament have often been used to discuss a particular issue of concern to people in the country; they are not normally used as a mechanism to hijack and play party politics.

In the last 14 years, we saw crisis after crisis caused by the ill-thought-out policies, plans and rank cronyism of the previous Government, but we engaged in the process and had debates. We did not commandeer a public petition to demand a new election; we opposed the Government and worked within the parliamentary ambit to do what was right. This petition has grown partly because of a lot of misinformation and partly because of foreign interference—[Laughter.] Members may laugh, but that happens to be correct.

When Labour formed the Government—

Wendy Morton

Will the hon. Lady give way?

Yasmin Qureshi

I want to make some points and then I will take interventions. When Labour got elected, the first thing we found was a £20 billion deficit—a big black hole that no one knew about. We therefore had to take the decision—[Interruption.] Members can try to shout and whatever else, but I am not giving up. Will whoever is making the noise let me speak, please? There was a £20 billion black hole, so the Government obviously had to make some policy in order to plug it. That meant raising winter fuel bills, introducing inheritance tax and raising national insurance contributions—things mentioned in the petition. We must recognise that if we are going to provide services and bring changes in the country, that requires financial expenditure, and no one knew about the £20 billion deficit.

When we took over, we found that our prisons were incredibly overcrowded. The previous Government said that they would find 20,000 prison places by the mid-2020s, but they created only 50. In our criminal justice system, victims have been waiting for trials to be heard in the Crown court—at least 73,000 trials—including serious cases. When the Conservatives were in power, we had about eight different Secretaries of State for Justice. It is therefore not surprising that our judicial system and prison system are in a complete mess at the moment.

In relation to the NHS, I remember that in 2010, when we left power, the time that people spent waiting in accident and emergency at a hospital was maybe a few hours; now, that time is eight or 10 hours. Getting an operation or seeing a doctor now takes years, as opposed to six months. Again, that is because the previous Government did nothing to deal with the issue, so we have had to deal with it. We have heard today's statement by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and there will be a debate later about all the things that we want to bring into play to make our NHS work better, because people need that.

We are the party that came in and solved the doctors' dispute, which had been going on for years and years. Why does that matter? Because it means that our health service will have good, decent provision and that some of the delays hopefully will be taken away. The Prime Minister today mentioned that we have plans to reduce waiting lists massively. These are the things that we are doing; the previous Government, which had 14 years, did nothing and left us with what we have.

We are the Government who have paid our teachers more, so that our children can be educated properly. We are the Government who have dealt with the issue of public transport and our drivers being on strikes. That is important, because we need to get the country going. Public transport is very important for the proper running of any country, and we need to have that. Just before Christmas, we also announced over £1 billion for people who are homeless and £1 billion or so for potholes.

The issue of regenerating the economy has been touched on. All these things will solve the problems of bad roads and help people who are homeless to be able to sleep warmly, but building roads also creates jobs and regenerates the economy. We have said that we will build more than 1.5 million houses. What will that do? It will regenerate our

economy as well. Everybody is talking about how we can regenerate the economy, and the stuff that we are doing on green energy and renewables will also create loads of jobs and regenerate our economy— [Interruption.] I hear some Opposition Members sniggering and laughing. Well, do you know what, Mrs Harris? Some of them have been MPs for the last 14 years, as I have been, and they know the failures of their Government.

I can talk about only a few things in six minutes, but the Labour Government have been doing enough to ensure not only that our economy is regenerated but that many institutions are properly financed, especially our health service, which everyone uses. It is so important that we look after it. The Labour party created the NHS, and it is the party that will always look after and save the NHS.

16:49:00

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con)

We all know that we live in a parliamentary democracy and that there does not need to be an election until summer 2029. There probably will not be an election before then, however many petitions are produced, but I think it would be foolish to ignore this petition, as an expression of public disappointment and anger. I do not want to be overtly party political, but I do think it would be useful for the Government not just to dismiss the petition as having been cooked up abroad—apparently—or by nefarious anti-democratic forces. I think it would be quite wise to listen to the public. If they are in a black hole—if indeed there is a black hole—I say to the Government: just stop digging. If they have to raise money, there are mechanisms, such as income tax, where—

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD)

Does the right hon. Member agree that the essence of the petition is in fact the political manifestation of buyer's remorse, and that the delivery and introduction of proportional representation would not lead to such remorse so soon?

Sir Edward Leigh

Well, actually, the Liberal party seems to have done very well from this system by focusing its attacks on Conservative constituencies. It seems to have many more seats than the Reform party, for instance, and less votes, but I will leave that aside.



Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab)  
Will the right hon. Member give way?

Sir Edward Leigh

No, I do not want to get involved in all this. I have given way once; I will conclude my remarks within the time limit.

I think it would be quite foolish for the Government to ignore this petition. If I may give some fatherly advice, it is always good to compromise when bringing in reforms. For instance, if the Government were worried about winter fuel payments going to everybody, perhaps they should have cancelled them for higher taxpayers. There would have been very little controversy about that, but taking the winter fuel allowance from somebody whose total income is only £13,000 a year is bound to cause great hardship. If they were worried about large estates escaping any inheritance tax, perhaps they should have focused their tax on the very largest estates of more than 1,000 acres, rather than picking on family farms of 250 acres. Or if they wanted to rake in more money from national insurance, perhaps they should have absolved, for instance, hospices from those proposals.

I just give that advice to the Government. Of course they will not take it, but it is always useful when bringing in reforms to think of the general public, and how those reforms will impact on people and relate to their sense of alienation. That is what I want to talk about now, because there is undoubtedly a sense of alienation in the country. It is partly due to the issues that I have been talking about, but also to do with general issues. I sit on the Council of Europe, and I see how other countries—France, Germany and Italy—are coping with political unrest. Unless the two major parties actually listen to the public and respond to their concerns, this country will simply see the rise of more and more populism of far-right and far-left parties.

There is a particular issue where people feel alienated. They cannot understand how in the last year, in a country like ours, something like 35,000 people jumped the queue, crossed the channel, and were put in hotels to stay here forever and break the rules. They cannot understand why no Government—either the previous Conservative Government or apparently this one—are actually solving the problem. I know that this Government are not going to follow our Rwanda policy, but they simply

cannot talk in easy terms about smashing the gangs when we all know that unless we have an offshoring policy, we will never stop people crossing the channel and making us a laughing stock in the world.

Another issue I want to talk about, on which people feel very frustrated, is the sheer level of legal migration. I want to put this particular point to the Labour party. This is not a right-wing point of view. This is Mattias Tesfaye—a Danish Immigration Minister and the son of Ethiopian refugees. He said:

“If you look at the historical background, it is completely normal that left-wing politicians like me are not against migration, but want it to be under control. If it isn’t—and it wasn’t since the 1980s—low-income and low-educated people pay the highest price for poor integration. It is not the wealthy neighbourhoods that have to integrate most of the children. On the contrary, the areas where the traditional social democratic voters and trade unionists live face the greatest problems.”

Both parties have to solve the problem of the sheer level of legal and illegal migration.

I will make one other point. We all believe that we must solve climate change, but we must do it in a moderate and sensible way. Many people in rural areas, such as the area I represent, are worried not only about the farmers tax but that, if they live in Gainsborough, they will see the 10,000 acres around their small town covered with solar farms. Let us have more solar farms on rooftops or on industrial warehouses, but when people see good agricultural land being taken away from them, with solar panels made by dodgy Chinese companies benefiting large landowners, that again leads to a sense of alienation. Both parties have to listen to the people; they cannot go full-steam ahead with their own policies, ignoring what many are frustrated about.

I have one last point to make. We have just had a statement in the main Chamber about the NHS and social care. Frankly, we have to have some sort of cross-party consensus on how we will pay for our increasingly elderly population. We cannot just throw brickbats at each side, saying, “It’s the fault of the Labour Government” or “It’s the fault of the Conservative Government.” We are all living longer. We are all going to be more frail in our old age, and to need more and more help. There has to be some sort of political consensus on how we will pay for it, and

my own view is that we will have to pay for it through some form of social insurance.

My advice to the Government is: you can ignore this petition—of course, you will ignore this petition, in the sense that there will not be a general election—but do not ignore the sense of alienation and frustration that lies behind it.

16:56:00

Imogen Walker (Hamilton and Clyde Valley) (Lab)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris.

I have the privilege of speaking in this Chamber today because, six months ago, the country voted for change—the biggest change, in fact, that this Parliament has seen in generations. We know why people voted for change. It was because, for 14 years, the Conservatives have been taking the country down a road that has left everybody worse off: NHS waiting lists spiralling out of control; no grip on the prison crisis; no plan for the economy; and no control over the cost of living crisis.

We stood on a manifesto of setting that right. That is why the general election that we have just had reduced the Tories to the smallest number in their history. Ours was a message of hard work and of sorting out the mess they made that everyone could see. But for all their failures, I think one of the cruellest things that the last Government did was to take away hope and to take away the belief that things can be changed not by gimmicks or by slogans but by doing the work and doing the right thing, even when it is difficult.

Wendy Morton

Will the hon. Lady give way?

Imogen Walker

I am going to make some more progress.

I know the frustration that people feel after years of chaos and neglect by their Government—in the case of Scotland, by two Governments, as a matter of fact—but I would say to everyone who feels let down by 14 years of broken promises: what the last Government did, lurching from crisis to crisis or from drama to drama, is not the way to make people's

lives better. They dodged the difficult decisions, and we are not doing that.

It has been just six months since we were elected, and we have already increased funding to the NHS, protected the pensions triple lock, invested in housing and delivered the biggest settlement to Scotland in the history of devolution. We have also set a Budget that funded all that, while protecting the pay packets of working people. Our manifesto said that we would stabilise the economy and rebuild public services, and that is what we are doing. The job is far from finished, but we will get there.

I ask Opposition Members, what has happened to their party? The Tory party we once knew was the biggest winner in Britain's electoral history, but its Members now sit here diminished and looking around—as they always do—for someone else to blame. But of course, blaming the voters is never the right thing to do. I am not going to criticise the people who signed this petition, because we all feel the frustration of the last decade and a half of people not being able to get what they need for themselves and their family.

Wendy Morton

Will the hon. Lady give way?

Imogen Walker

I am going to finish soon, so I will make progress.

When people have been let down so badly and for so long, they do not forget. They do not forget quickly—I understand that—but fixing this country is not a six-month job, and Conservative Members must be honest that it took them longer than that to get us into this mess. I know that people have had their hope trampled on, but better times lie ahead, and this Labour Government are here to see that we get there.

16:59:00

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con)

Happy new year to you, Mrs Harris, and to everyone else at this important debate, which was ably introduced by the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), the Chairman of the Petitions Committee.

It is an extraordinary thing that we are debating a petition calling for a general election, barely six months from the previous election. It is even more extraordinary that that petition generated over 3 million signatures in just a few weeks. It is also highly noteworthy that of the 650 parliamentary constituencies in the UK, six of the top 10 by number of signatures are in the county of Essex. That includes my constituency of Rayleigh and Wickford, which is at No. 8. I do not see an Essex Labour MP here. Having spoken to my constituents at surgeries and out and about in my patch, and having seen their emails, perhaps I can suggest some reasons why.

The first reason is the economy. In late May, during the general election campaign, Labour's then shadow Chancellor gave a major speech on what Labour's economic policy would be if it won. In that speech, famously, she promised that all Labour's policies were "fully funded and fully costed". She said that as a result there would be no need for any further tax increases if Labour won in July. Then, within four months of the Budget, the very same person announced a gigantic £40 billion of tax increases, on everything from national insurance to inheritance tax, stamp duty, capital gains, farming, landlords, pubs, school fees and even, potentially, service widows.

The Chancellor's justification for one of the largest tax increases in British peacetime history was this supposed £22 billion black hole, even though £9 billion of it was caused by a combination of public sector wage increases, including for junior doctors and train drivers, made after Labour came to office, as the public were all too aware. Labour's central economic proposition—the need to fix this supposed black hole—was a sham from the start. That is why it has never been taken on by the public, who saw right through it from the start.

Labour gave the same justification for withdrawing the winter fuel allowance from up to 10 million pensioners. That option, long favoured by Treasury mandarins, was one that Labour often accused us of being willing to implement, although we never did. It was a Labour Chancellor who eventually did so, supposedly to save £1.5 billion in a full year. However, such has been the subsequent shift among pensioners to sign up for pension credit, largely in order to keep getting the allowance, that a large part of that £1.5 billion has effectively already disappeared and could be negated entirely, thus proving the withdrawal of the allowance

to be a total own goal, not just morally but financially. My hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), my neighbour, reports that more than 20,000 pensioners in her constituency have had their winter fuel allowance withdrawn. As she puts it, they and their families are furious with Labour.

Then we have Labour's plan for so-called devolution, as outlined in a White Paper before Christmas. In Essex, it would replace a two-tier system of local government with another two-tier system of local government that would take decisions even further away from local people. It is a Trojan horse designed to concrete over our green belt in Essex and is based largely on Sadiq Khan's systems, as is clear from reading the White Paper. I can tell the House that the last thing we want in Essex is another Sadiq Khan.

There is also great frustration about the small boats. Labour promised to "smash the gangs". That was its slogan, and that is what it was: a slogan, not a policy. The smuggling gangs remain decidedly unsmashed. Instead, without any credible deterrent, the small boats keep coming: they are up by a third since Labour took office. Labour clearly has no plan whatever, so the boats are going to keep coming while the Government look on.

So many of Labour's plans were based on economic growth. From us, they inherited the fastest growing economy in the G7. [Laughter.] It was! And it is now flatlining under Labour. That is why we had the five missions, and now we have the six milestones; soon we will have the seven wonders of the world. We cannot increase growth by whacking up taxes across the entire British economy.

There are 7,287 people in my Rayleigh and Wickford constituency who have signed the petition. We cannot know why every one of them signed it. Perhaps they were enraged that Labour promised no new tax increases and then put taxes up by 40 billion quid. Perhaps they are among the up to 10 million pensioners who have had their winter fuel allowance taken away by the Chancellor. Perhaps they are among the 3.8 million WASPI women who were led up the garden path by Labour, from the PM downwards, prior to the general election and were dumped unceremoniously thereafter. Perhaps they believed Labour's promises to smash the gangs, only to see arrivals increase by a third since Labour took office. Or perhaps they have just realised that when Labour

promised change, what it really meant was more taxes, more bureaucracy and even more boats.

Whatever it was, we now have a Labour Government who, by breaking so many of their promises so early to those who elected them, have already all but surrendered their moral right to govern. The British people want change all right: they want a change from Labour, and the sooner the better.

17:05:00

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship again, Mrs Harris, and a real privilege to serve as MP for my constituency. Over six months ago, I had the privilege of being elected again to represent the towns and villages where I live. There is no greater privilege than being an MP and getting to champion the representation and the change that politics, when done right, can deliver.

In that spirit, I would like to thank the petition organiser and all those who engaged with the petition in good faith, as I am sure he and many of those here today did, for bringing this matter to our attention and for instilling the level of interest that this debate has doubtless generated outside this place. I am sure that there is a great deal that he and I would disagree about, and I am sure that that will be as true in five years' time as it is now, but we probably both agree that for far too long, far too many politicians have taken our electorate for granted and have let people down. That is something that none of us, whatever political party we represent, should allow to continue.

Although this is not the first time that I have been elected to serve my community, it feels like the stakes could not be higher. Throughout the election, I heard some truly heartbreaking stories of people whose health had been allowed to deteriorate to breaking point by a health service that was no longer there for them when they needed it; of families whose lives had been squeezed and narrowed beyond all recognition by cost of living pressures that were simply not of their making; and of far too many people who had lost faith in the basic ability of the state to do the simple things right—keeping our borders secure, fixing our roads and showing people that politics can be a force for good. Against that backdrop, being elected again in this fragile time

for the party of Government is a deep responsibility that I and my colleagues on the Government Benches take incredibly seriously.

Throughout the election period, we were under no illusions about the fact that we would be inheriting challenging circumstances, but no one could have predicted the depth of the challenges that we would inherit, with public services way beyond breaking point, far further than imagined, with prisons closer to overflowing and with our health service even more on its knees. The NHS had to advise our incoming Health Secretary that, far from expanding appointments, we should be cutting them—at a point when we had record waiting lists. It was an unacceptable inheritance, far beyond what we had been led to believe we would be picking up. And yes, public finances were in an even worse situation, with a black hole that was growing, as was verified by the Treasury, the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Office for Budget Responsibility, and that would only get worse without robust action.

I am as angry about those stories as anyone. I completely understand why those are frustrating things to hear. I am frustrated, and I know my colleagues are, but we would have done a disservice to our country and our constituents if we had not faced up to them and the tough choices that we had to inherit. Only the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) knows why he called an early election, but given our inheritance, it is pretty clear that it was not because he thought that things could only get better.

However difficult it is, I am glad to have the privilege of being in a party that now has to wrestle with the tough choices. We need to rebuild faith with and start fixing things for our constituents. I am glad that we are not shying away from that. It would have been easy to will away the black hole, will away the scale of the problems and introduce a Budget and reforms that tinkered around the edges of the challenges. We are not doing that.

There is no doubt that this Budget was a big Budget. It was a big Budget because we needed to make some big choices. They were not easy—if they were, even the last party might have been able to make them—but we faced up to them. We could not continue to tolerate a situation in which too many of my constituents were waiting too long to see a doctor, too many young people in my constituency with additional needs were waiting too long to have them met, and far too many of the



very basic things for which every citizen should be able to count on their Government—border security, fixed roads, a functioning economy—simply were not happening.

I am under no illusion: I know that those choices brought with them some pain. It is for us, over the next five years, to work closely with our communities to show them that those choices have been worthwhile and show them that we are using that money to good end, delivering on the things that they elected us to change. Over the next five years, that is my mission, and that is the mission of everyone on the Government Benches.

I have no doubt that we will make some mistakes along the way—I certainly will—but I hope that in five years' time, or whenever the next election is called, I will be able to go back to our electorate, talk to them about the changes we have been able to make, and show them the difference that a Labour Government have made to the health service and to the incomes of working people by designing and delivering an economy that is truly working for our communities again.

For far too long, we have accepted a managed decline and a broken political settlement in this country. I have no doubt that it is not going to be easy. It certainly has not been an easy first six months, but I am incredibly proud to be part of a party that is facing up to those difficult choices and that remains resolute in its resolve to deliver for people and show them, choice by choice and decision by decision, that things can get better again. We will be doing everything we can to ensure that they do.

17:10:00

Nigel Farage (Clacton) (Reform)

I generally find that the best ideas in life come from pubs, so it is no particular surprise that Michael Westwood is a publican. I represent Clacton, which has the third highest number of people who signed the petition. I do not think that the 8,000 people in Clacton who signed it did so just to get a fresh general election. They knew that that would not happen; what they were actually expressing was a sense of utter disenchantment with the entire political system.

The debate this afternoon can be used as a game of ping-pong between the two political parties that have dominated British politics since the end of the first world war, but actually something bigger is going on out there. Have a look at the turnout, which was the second lowest ever at a general election, despite the introduction of mass postal voting. Have a think about the fact that the Labour party got a third of the vote and two thirds of the seats. For every Labour MP there are 34,000 votes; for every Reform MP there are 820,000 votes. When we think about that and give it some context, perhaps it is not surprising that confidence in the whole system is breaking down.

Having studied politics for a long time—not as long as the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), obviously, but over 50 years—I cannot think of a Government who have seen a collapse in confidence as quickly as this one. There are 26,000 pensioners in the constituency of Clacton alone who are losing their winter fuel allowance; they had no idea on the day of the general election that that was going to happen. There are 100 family farms in the Clacton constituency; many of the farmers I have met are frankly in tears, because they cannot see how their husbandry of that land, which in some cases has gone on for hundreds of years, will be able to survive inheritance tax.

The national insurance increases are yet another hammer blow for the men and women running small businesses in this country. They had not expected it; they were promised in the run-up to the general election that it would not happen. We now find that even GP surgeries in the constituency and hospices close to it are affected, so perhaps we can see why people are upset: they feel that things are being done to them that they did not have realistic expectations of.

The broader problem, I think, is the economy as a whole. The economy works on confidence: people borrow money and lend money according to confidence in each other. In the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, we have two people who look as if they are going to a family funeral every day. There is an air of miserabilism. Even a speech from the Prime Minister is the complete opposite of one from Tony Blair: not “Things can only get better”, but “Things can only get worse”.

Dawn Butler

If the hon. Member came into a new job and discovered a £22 billion black hole, I think he would look a bit miserable as well.

Nigel Farage

The idea of a £22 billion black hole is nonsense. It is £2.7 trillion. The national debt is massive. It exploded over the course of the last 14 years—it increased two and a half times—and it is set to go higher still, so we are in much deeper difficulties economically. Even to talk about a £22 billion black hole is not to understand the problems that we have. We have zero growth in this country. As for foreign investment into Britain, yes, there is money coming in, but it is not coming in at anywhere near the rate we need. We have major, major problems. I actually believe that this Government have talked us into a recession, because confidence is falling to that degree.

Members might note that the more rapidly legal migration rises—the more rapidly the population expands—the poorer we get as individuals. In the last two years, we have seen record levels of net migration into Britain, and in six of the last eight quarters, GDP per capita has fallen. Ultimately, the issue that led 3 million people to ask for another general election is perhaps the breach of trust between Westminster and the country on immigration. I am not even discussing the boats; I am talking about the impact of the population rising by more than 10 million in the past 20 years on primary school availability, housing and people's wages. That is the ultimate breach of trust. Labour Members have not promised anything at all on legal immigration, but they need to be aware that if the net migration figures are anywhere near what they have been in the past few years, confidence in their party will fall further.

I think the whole system is in need of absolute, fundamental change, and I suspect that this petition is just a symptom of a much bigger cry for a different kind of politics in the United Kingdom. Members can con themselves as much as they like, but the old two-party system is breaking up before our eyes. The next general election is going to see a very, very different Parliament.

17:16:00

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. This has been an interesting debate so far. Like other hon. Members, I thank the people who came up with the petition and those who signed it, but ultimately I believe that it is based on a false premise: the idea that economic growth can be kick-started within a single quarter of a new Government after 14 years of a previous Government.

Labour Members always talk about 14 years, although the Conservatives—and, I dare say, some Lib Dems—do not want to hear it, but in places such as my constituency it has not been just 14 years. The global financial crisis was in 2008, so it has actually been 16 years, two of which were regrettably under a Labour Government. In 2007—a year before that—people in my community in the north-east were queuing up on Northumberland Street in Newcastle to take cash out of cashpoints because Northern Rock was going bust. Our economy has not been functioning in the way that people in this country would expect for the best part of two decades, and the idea that we can turn around 17-plus years of failure in less than 17 weeks is, I am afraid, for the birds.

I am not surprised that we are discussing this petition—there is clearly a great well of discontent—but it was cheered on by politicians, some of whom are on the Opposition Benches today, who lost a free and fair election fair and square, and it was then amplified by a foreign billionaire. I know that hon. Members do not want to hear about foreign interference, but it is a fact that he used his platform and his algorithm to exacerbate this petition to the point that we are here today.

I am not surprised that just over 4,000 people in my constituency of Gateshead Central and Whickham signed this petition, but 18,000-plus people voted for me and the Labour party on 4 July, just over six months ago. I will not allow what effectively amounts to an online vote exacerbated by Twitter to overrule the votes of more than 18,000 people and everyone else who took part in that election on the basis of nothing more than that. We had a free and fair election in this country, in which every eligible adult was allowed to take part and those who wanted to vote voted. The result was a majority for the Labour party and that is the way we are going to govern. We are going to govern for the majority of people in this country, whether they voted for us or not.

I know what I am meant to say. Hon. Members on the other side of the debate will say that Labour has misled people and broken promises, so I

am meant to play my part by reeling off the litany of promises broken by the previous Government. But I am not going to do that. [Interruption.] No, there is a serious point to be made here: in British politics, the standard used to be that we might disagree with each other, but we would make our points and the other side would agree or disagree on that basis.

I am sad to say that that is not how British politics works now. Now, those on one side make their arguments and those on the other side sow distrust in those arguments. They say that we are all liars, so if we are all liars, I am a liar. But if they say that I am a liar, they say that you are liar. They say that we are all liars and that on that basis, "No one should trust any of them." Well, I will not play that game, because I believe that the vast majority of Members of Parliament are honourable and respectful people.

I will not accept the lie that Members of Parliament are disconnected from their communities. In my six months as a Member of Parliament, I have never felt more connected with my community; I have never spoken to more of my neighbours; and I have never been more engaged with the business of politics and the business of my community. I believe that that is the same for all hon. Members, regardless of party, on both sides of the House. I have great disagreements with many hon. Members who have spoken in the debate, but I will not play the game of sowing distrust, because ultimately that damages our democracy, our politics and the British people.

Instead, I will talk about the promises that Labour has kept, such as the new deal for working people that will make a radical change to the rights of working people in this country, including my constituents in Gateshead Central and Whickham; the changes being made on energy so that we become an energy-independent country; and the planning reforms and house building policies that will mean that my son, and indeed all our children and grandchildren, will have the homes they need to live in. I will also mention the measures to bring the railways back into public ownership, so that they once again function for our benefit, and our Budget, which invested in public services rather than cutting them.

Hon. Members may disagree with that, but they should not use it to sow distrust. Let us have political arguments in this country, because the way that we do things at the moment is not who we are. This is not the way we do things and this is not what a good democracy looks like. Let us be better.

17:22:00

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con)

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Harris. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for introducing the debate so well on behalf of the Petitions Committee, of which I am a member.

Most new Governments come into power with positive plans to get things done quickly; they are often defined by early successes in their first 100 days in office and they move fast to deliver on election promises. However, this Labour Government are not normal. There has been no positivity; everything has been doom and gloom. In their first few hundred days in office, they have lurched from one disaster to another, and they have broken just about every promise that they made before the election.

Let us look at some of the promises that they have shattered to pieces. Labour promised not to increase national insurance—broken. Labour promised not to raise taxes on farmers—broken. Labour promised not to scrap the winter fuel payment—broken. Labour promised to compensate WASPI women—broken. Labour promised to protect single-sex spaces—broken. Labour promised no cliff edge in the North sea oil and gas sector—broken. Labour promised to cut energy bills—broken. Labour promised a £150 million war chest for the Scotland Office —broken.

Wherever anyone stands on any of those individual policy issues, there is no doubt that this Labour Government have not kept their word; they have broken promises to voters that they made not once or twice, but hundreds of times. In Scotland, their broken promises are letting the SNP off the hook. The nationalists are benefiting because this disastrous Labour Government are not delivering and not sticking to anything that was promised pre-election.

UK Labour is driving Scottish Labour into a ditch and nobody in Scottish Labour has the backbone to stand up to them. Scottish Labour MPs voted through these broken promises; Anas Sarwar's Members are content not to keep their commitments. It is no wonder that so many people in the borders and across Scotland are losing trust in Labour. More and more people are moving away from Scottish Labour because they see that it does not stand for anything except broken promises. It has betrayed workers, businesses, pensioners, farmers and our oil and gas industry. Labour has broken its word on tax, on women's rights, on social security and on energy bills. Anas Sarwar must be terrified of who this Labour Government are going to hit next.

Now, only the Scottish Conservatives are standing up to the SNP and taking on the nationalists. Under our new leader, Russell Findlay, we are reaching out to all those people who Labour have left behind: everyone who feels disillusioned by Labour's empty, broken promises of change; everyone who feels disconnected from what happens at Holyrood under the SNP and what happens here under Labour; and everyone who wants politicians to show some common sense for a change. Labour will not represent those people but the Conservatives will.

17:25:00

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in this debate, and I very much thank those behind the petition who are here to listen to the debate. I know from the emails that I have had from Dartford residents who signed the petition that those residents have real concerns about some of the tough decisions that the new Government have had to make. I absolutely hear what they are saying to us.

As other hon. Members have said, the petition is also a sign that many people across this country have seen their faith that politics can bring positive change diminish altogether. That is extremely unfortunate and we need to rebuild that faith. It is hard to argue that people are wrong to lack that faith, however, given the legacy of 14 years of Conservative Government. The basics of government went uncompleted, especially over the last decade, when far too little infrastructure was built and a coach and horses were driven through public services and the public finances, leaving both in dire straits.

In my constituency of Dartford, the plan for a new lower Thames crossing, first proposed in 2009 by the last Labour Government, saw far too little progress and has still not been built, leaving my constituents facing growing traffic chaos. The current crossing continually operates over capacity, struggling every day with 50,000 more vehicles than it was designed for. Yet, as far as Dartford residents can see, nothing has been done to make their lives better.

It is instructive that some hon. Members present believe that the £22 billion black hole in the public finances that we identified on assuming office is an underestimate of the problem faced by our new Government. I urge Opposition Members to honestly consider whether they can defend the record of the last Government: a decade of growing NHS waiting lists—even before the pandemic—and stagnating living standards. The last Government never saw a crisis that they could not make worse. The asylum system was broken, but they passed a law that stopped the processing of applications, leaving thousands in permanent limbo, with only a vague hope that the £700 million Rwanda scheme would fix anything.

If we are talking about broken promises, the last Government pledged many times to bring NHS waiting lists down and instead they grew and grew, with no resolution to the strikes that were making them worse. The last Government set a target of 300,000 new homes a year and yet, in a desperate attempt to appease their Back Benchers, they made changes to the national planning guidance that led to the supply of homes falling through the floor. Is it any wonder that people have doubts about the ability of any Government, or the ability of us as elected Members, to deliver positive change for their lives?

Yet, like other hon. Members who have spoken in this debate, I remain hopeful. Yes, democracy can seem slow and change can seem incremental, but I have faith in this Government to deliver the change our country needs and to prove that people's votes at the ballot box can lead to better lives across our country.

We set out our plans in our manifesto, which was intended to be for the full length of this Parliament—let us not forget that—and we have recently announced, in our Plan for Change, that we will make changes for this country. Unlike the last Government, we will build the homes



that families across this country so desperately need. In Ebbsfleet, in my constituency, a further 10,000 homes are planned over the next decade.

We will get the NHS back on its feet—today’s announcements were enormously encouraging—so that those neighbourhoods most in need will see a reduction in waiting lists, so that we see a health service that has the capacity to support all our residents, and so that in my constituency of Dartford, our Darent Valley hospital will have the capacity it needs to treat my constituents. I believe that we will build the infrastructure that our country needs for the 21st century, and I hope that in this new year the lower Thames crossing will also get the go ahead, and that we will also see investment in home-grown clean energy that will bring with it jobs for the future.

At the end of this Parliament we will be rightly judged as to whether we have delivered on our manifesto, improved lives and set the foundation of our future prosperity. That will be the time for electors in Dartford, and across the country, to make their choice of a future Government, not now.

17:30:00

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con)

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Harris. I thank the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), for introducing this debate today.

This petition has succeeded already in a very important way: it has brought this debate to Westminster Hall. It is a broader debate than we are often able to have, and it has been passionately argued on both sides, with some important points made.

I was particularly struck by some of the points made by the hon. Member for Gateshead Central and Whickham (Mark Ferguson). He is absolutely right that representative democracy can do some things that social media and other fora cannot. That is why it is so important that we have these debates in this place and that Governments are properly held to account and made to give an account of themselves.

There are always people who are unhappy with the Government, and there are always people who are going to be unhappy with an incoming

Government, but the speed of the fall of the current Government really is quite striking. There were very high hopes for this new Labour Government, and they have been very speedily dashed.

In our system, no petition can force a general election. It is the decision of the Prime Minister of the day, or if he or she is forced by a confidence vote. However, I genuinely hope that the Government will reflect on the scale of this petition. We have lots of petition debates and lots of petitions are made to this Parliament, but the scale of this one, and the rapidity with which signatures have been gathered, is truly striking.

In East Hampshire, 5,288 signatures were added by the start of the year. People in East Hampshire feel particularly let down by things like the family farm tax, which is going to undermine the whole structure of agriculture in our area, which underpins the rural economy and society. Then there are the changes to business rates, which were painted as a cut but are actually an increase, particularly for retail and hospitality businesses, which will undermine the small businesses in our market towns and village centres. The same applies to the unrealistic housing targets that are being visited upon the countryside, even while cities like London have their housing targets cut. The hike in employer national insurance contributions was painted as not being a tax on working people, when everybody knows that, in the end, it will only come through as a tax on the wages people are paid or the level of employment, and this will harm jobs locally. Then there is the scrapping of the winter fuel payment, right down to those on very low incomes.

When we judge a Government, we never do it just on what was in their manifesto; we also do it on the things that were not in their manifesto, but which they did anyway. With this Government, so far the most striking of those things has been the winter fuel payment. This was a Blair era reform that has been kept ever since. Through all the years from 2010 through to 2015 and beyond, when we had to make some really difficult decisions—and when, by the way, we faced a £155 billion black hole inherited from the previous Labour Government—one thing that was never touched was the winter fuel payment. That is because it is particularly well-targeted—not in terms of the number of people, but in terms of the exact time of year when they need it—and helps with an expense that falls on older people right in the middle of winter.

At the Budget, we heard for weeks from the Chancellor about the importance of economic growth. That is something that everyone on our side agreed with—it was fantastic to hear. Economic growth is what ultimately matters for driving the economy and affording the excellent public services that we all value so much. There was a reasonable expectation that it would be the most growth-focused Budget that we have ever had in this country, so it was a huge disappointment that there were no major growth-driving measures in it at all. In fact, the Budget saw the forecast for growth actually fall.

Everything this Government have done has continually focused on this supposed £22 billion black hole, which is itself a mix of one-off and recurring items, so it cannot be considered as a single figure at all. In any case, whenever a Government Minister comes into a new Department, on their day one or day two briefing, they get told a long list of unfunded in-year spending pressures. That is not a black hole; it is a management challenge. It is what Government Ministers at any Department or, on a macro level, the Treasury has to deal with. They make choices about how to do it, and they will be held to account for those choices.

Even in this 24-hour media and social media age, government is still not actually a popularity contest. Most Governments will look over a four or five-year period and will try to do the unpopular things in year one—the difficult things—in the hope and expectation that they will yield positive results later. The difference this time around is that, when we look at what this Government have done in year one, it is difficult to see how it will yield great results further down the line.

I talked at the start about high hopes being dashed, and that would certainly be true not only for members of the public but for Labour activists and Labour MPs. There had been a belief that, just by having a Labour Government, things would improve. I wonder if, when they look back, they might regret adopting “Things Can Only Get Better” as their anthem. It is not true. This is all about the decisions that they make. I hope this Government, reflecting on this petition and this debate, will take the opportunity to rethink some of theirs.

17:36:00

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris.

As far as the petition before us is concerned, I will make the obvious point that other Members have made before me. We had a general election six months ago and the nation spoke; it delivered a landslide victory for the Labour party. We made it perfectly clear before, during and after the election what the scale of the task at hand was, after 14 years of Tory failure. No one said it was going to be easy; no quick fixes were offered. We are not a Government of populist, easy soundbites, with no real solutions. We made it very clear that, such was the scale of national renewal required across the UK, our Government's missions would require years, not weeks or months. But this Government have already demonstrated their determination to take the hard decisions to stabilise our economy and begin the process of growth and renewal.

Today is a prime example. Others want to pander to populist nonsense at the start of a new year and, worse still, echo dangerous foreign influences. This Government —my Labour Government and my Prime Minister—today, at the start of a new year, are instead setting out how we will reform the NHS from top to bottom and drive down waiting times, while others want to promote the frankly risible suggestion that we should have another general election just because they do not like and cannot respect the outcome from just six months ago. In July 2024, my constituency of West Dunbartonshire elected a Labour MP and therefore helped to elect a Labour Government for the first time since 2010, with 48.8% of the vote. That is a very clear mandate. We do not grant a rerun just because some people do not like the result. No, we will get on with our Plan for Change and, in doing so, demonstrate that the truth matters, and that defending democracy also matters.

In July 2024, Scotland and West Dunbartonshire voted for change. The work to deliver that change and honour our election promises is already happening. Our first, historic Budget delivered the largest settlement to Scotland in the history of devolution, with £5 billion extra for the Scottish Government to spend on vital services. Labour's Budget marks an end to austerity and provides the funding required for our NHS, schools and public services in Scotland, to reduce hospital waiting lists and provide fair funding to local councils. The work to deliver GB Energy has started at pace, and the company will be headquartered in Scotland, delivering energy security, good jobs and climate action, as well as lowering bills.

One of my biggest promises to the people of West Dunbartonshire was to help to introduce day one employment rights, to increase the national living wage and make work pay—and we are delivering that. We are delivering a pay rise for over 3 million of the lowest paid workers across the UK—a £1,400 pay boost for full-time workers. Our Labour Government delivered the funding required for the regeneration of the town centres in my constituency and my communities, the investment required to transform Dumbarton, and the £20 million required for Clydebank town centre.

There is plenty more work to do. West Dunbartonshire's, Scotland's and the UK's best days lie ahead of us. This is not a serious proposition before us today, but we do now have a serious Government, determined to get on with the business of delivering change. In our Prime Minister—I hope I get this quote correct—we have not only someone who is a “hero” who makes us look “cool”, but, more importantly, someone who will see us through this decade of renewal and deliver the change that the UK voted for.

17:41:00

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I, too, thank the Chair of the Petitions Committee, the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), for introducing the debate, and, through him, Mr Michael Westwood, who has given us an opportunity to debate these matters.

I am proud to speak on behalf of the constituents of Maldon, 8,057 of whom had signed the petition by the time this debate started—that figure has probably increased even further since. We are the second highest constituency, beaten only by the electors of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), who I am sure would be here as well were he not serving on the Front Bench.

I share the sentiments behind the petition in full, but, as has already been pointed out, clearly under our system the ability to have another general election does not exist, unless there is a remarkable change in the view of either the Prime Minister or of Parliament. Our system is designed to deliver a “strong and stable” Government, and most of the

time it does that. I remain a supporter of the system of government, even though I understand the anger felt by the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage). It is the case that our system was built essentially for when there were two main parties, with perhaps a third minority. We now have not just a third, but a fourth, and even a fifth minority in some areas. That has produced this extraordinary result, whereby the present Government have a majority of 100 seats in Parliament, having achieved fewer votes than the Labour party achieved under its last leader, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). But that is the system that we have.

The reason why this petition has attracted such support, and so quickly, is not just that people dislike what this Government are doing, but that they feel, as the petitioner sets out, that it is a direct breach of the promises made to the electorate at the time of the last general election. Even within a few weeks of the election, I was receiving angry emails from pensioners who had been misled. They had listened to claims by Labour spokesmen during the election that if they voted Conservative, a Conservative Government might abolish the winter fuel allowance. The implication of that was that a Labour Government would be safe and would protect the winter fuel allowance. Yet a few weeks later, it was announced that it would go.

That was followed a few weeks later by the farmers. The farmers in my constituency had been to the National Farmers' Union conference and had listened to the leader of the Labour party tell them, from the platform, that a Labour Government would have no intention of getting rid of agricultural property relief. Yet that was precisely what was announced in the Budget. The consequence is that families who have farmed in my area for generations, going back to their great grandparents, now say that they will have to sell up because they will not be able to afford the inheritance tax bill.

I have also had letters from small businesses that understood that working people would not see a tax rise, but they—the people who employ those working people—now find that their entire profit has been wiped out by the increase in national insurance contributions, with the result that they will now have to either scrap pay rises this year or, in some cases, lay off staff.

In my constituency in Essex—which, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) pointed out, was well represented in the petition—we were already faced with a massive amount of development taking place with no corollary in terms of infrastructure. The new housing targets that have been imposed in Maldon represent an increase of 100% on what was already required, while in Chelmsford they represent an increase of 60%—and yet there is no sign of the infrastructure investment. Those targets are being imposed on our local communities despite the Labour party saying that it would take into account the feelings of local communities. In all these areas, people listened to what they were told in the election and have found that the new Government have done precisely the reverse of what was promised.

Mr Francois

I am completely opposed to increasing VAT on school fees, but at least Labour did put that in its manifesto. Have my right hon. Friend's constituents told him, as mine have told me, that one of the reasons they are so angry about the decision on winter fuel allowance is that it was not in the manifesto, they were not told that was what they were voting for and, therefore, Labour has no mandate for it at all?

Sir John Whittingdale

I entirely sympathise with my right hon. Friend's point. The winter fuel decision was a very direct breach of an undertaking given, but even with VAT on schools, which he correctly says was in the Labour party manifesto, it was said that the money it raised—if it does raise any money, which a number of us doubt—would be invested in employing teachers and go to schools. However, in the last few days, we have heard that there is no guarantee of that at all and the money will just go to the Treasury. The assurances given about how this will benefit state pupils have, again, proved worthless.

There will not be an election unless something extraordinary happens; under our system, only the Prime Minister or Parliament can call an election early. I suspect the Father of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), is the only other person here who can remember when a Labour Government were brought down in a confidence vote in 1979. With a majority of 170, that is unlikely to happen to this Government. Prime Ministers who have called elections earlier than five years have found that it was not always

a wise decision—as was certainly the case in 2017 and, arguably, in 2024—so the truth is we are likely to have this Government in power for the next five years, but I believe it is unlikely to be longer.

We will use that time to regain trust. The new leader of the Conservative party is right that we have to work to do. We did not get everything right and, indeed, made some bad mistakes. We need to learn from that, just as the Conservative party did in 1974 and 1997, when we reflected on the reasons why we lost and worked hard to regain trust. However, in the meantime, we also have a job to do over the next five years in holding this Government to account. I echo the remarks of the Father of the House: even if this debate does not bring about a general election, I hope that Labour Members will listen to the voices expressed in terms of the 3 million signatures on the petition.

17:48:00

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris.

I understand that the people who signed this petition feel angry, and a lot of people are angry in my constituency of Ealing Southall. They are angry because their kids cannot buy a home, they are angry because their parents cannot get the hip operation they need and they are angry because, when their car gets nicked or their house gets burgled, the police do not seem to be able to do much about it. But it is clear where the blame for this lies. The Conservative party has been in charge of this country for the last 14 years. It was the Conservative party that did not build the affordable homes we need; it was the Conservative party that ran our NHS into the ground; and it was the Conservative party that drastically reduced the number of neighbourhood police officers on our streets. That is before I even get on to how it trashed the economy, with mortgages going up by hundreds of pounds overnight and a £22 billion black hole in the country's finances.

I understand that it is easy to get distracted and to start blaming other people for the mess that the country was left in, but that just lets the Conservatives off the hook for the damage they have done to our public services and our economy. As we live in a democracy, on 4 July people were asked to decide what they wanted through the ballot box, and they said that they wanted change. They wanted a break after 14 years of



Conservative chaos. I understand that people might want that change to happen fast, and they might want a quick fix. If only we could wipe away all the damage of those 14 years of Conservative misrule in an instant, or even in a few months. However, life does not work like that. Change takes a serious plan, it takes hard graft and it takes time. That is why this Labour Government have launched our Plan For Change, which sets out what we will do to fix the NHS, to put police back on our streets and to build the affordable homes we need. The Budget last year was the first step in how we stabilise our broken economy so that we can pay for it all without increasing taxes on working people.

Most importantly, our Plan For Change gives people the tools to check in four years' time, at the next election, whether we have delivered what we promised. People will be able to check whether waiting lists have gone down, whether there are more neighbourhood police and whether it is easier for their kids to get on the housing ladder. They will be able to check whether their local school has a free breakfast club, whether there are more qualified teachers and whether their energy bills are based on cheaper, home-grown energy instead of rocketing up every time that Putin sneezes.

What would Brenda from Bristol say about this petition's call for a general election? I think she would say, "Not another one!" I think she would rightly say, "We should stop wasting our time debating pointless motions and get back to the hard work this Labour Government are doing of fixing the damage the Conservatives have done to our economy and our public services."

17:52:00

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con)

I begin by congratulating the organiser of this petition, who is my constituent in Kingswinford and South Staffordshire, Michael Westwood. The hon. Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) suggested that this petition was motivated by political partisanship, and she seemed to suggest that it was the result of foreign interference. As far as I know, Mr Westwood is not, and has never been, a member of any political party.

Yasmin Qureshi

What I said was that it was misinformation, as well as foreign interference and politicising. I mentioned those three things, not just one.

Mike Wood

I am not sure that has entirely helped her case. There is certainly no reason to imagine that Mr Westwood was in any way influenced by any foreign state or other foreign actor. He is the owner of a small business—

Yasmin Qureshi

Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mike Wood

In just a moment. He is the owner of a small business in the Black Country who has seen the impact that Labour's broken promises are already having on his business, others like his, and the wider economy. The hon. Lady really owes Mr Westwood an apology, which I hope she will deliver in private after this debate. If she wishes to deliver it in public during the debate, I will of course give way.

Yasmin Qureshi

On a point of order, Ms Harris. At no time did I say that the individual constituent was being influenced by a foreign—[Interruption.] No, I did not say that. I said that the petition on its own, as it was sold, has been motivated by a number of factors. At no time did I attribute anything to the individual constituent of the hon. Gentleman.

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair)

Thank you, Ms Qureshi. Your point has been made and noted.

Mike Wood

I think the words speak for themselves, and Mr Westwood is sitting there having brought the petition forward and gained 3 million signatures. The signatures reflect the strength of the public's dissatisfaction, frustration and betrayal with the Labour Government's failure to uphold the promises they made during the election campaign.

Political parties are elected based on manifestos that outline their vision and commitments to the public. When those promises are not fulfilled or, worse, are abandoned, trust between the electorate and the

Government erodes. Voters invest not only their votes but their hopes for the future in the Government they elect. When those promises are broken, as they so clearly have been here, and when hopes are dashed by the Government going back on the platform on which they were so recently elected, then people have every right to feel betrayed.

People feel betrayed by a Government who categorically promised not to increase national insurance contributions but within months had hiked that tax, threatening wage growth for workers and hammering small businesses in particular. They feel betrayed by a Prime Minister who challenged his predecessor at Prime Minister's questions to rule out restricting winter fuel payments but within weeks of entering Downing Street had taken those same payments away from 90% of pensioners.

They feel betrayed by a Government who promised not to change agricultural property relief but then scaled back that relief, putting family farms at risk, many of which have been farmed for generations. They feel betrayed by a Government who promised to deliver the fastest growing economy in the G7, but took an economy that was growing faster than other countries in the G7 and turned it into one with no growth at all.

The Labour party knew full well what the situation was before the election, yet it cynically chose not to make its unpopular plans public. They waited until they were in power. Rather than being honest with the public in advance, they ducked the choice and took the easy route instead. Few people will imagine that this petition or debate might lead to an early election. Sadly, it is not going to happen. But the petition is another clear sign of the betrayal felt by so many voters and the collapse in trust and support that the Government were lent last summer.

17:57:00

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op)

It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate under your chairship, Mrs Harris.

The new year offers a good opportunity to reflect on a busy 2024, which saw the country choose to elect a Labour Government after a long and hard-fought election campaign. Though we are rightly proud of our

democratic political system in the UK, we cannot ignore the mistrust in our politics and some politicians. This mistrust has been inflamed by years of Tory chaos at the heart of Government. The new Government is made up of serious, principled political leaders who are committed to working hard to rebuild that trust.

Despite the challenges we face, I am proud that in our country Governments are elected by democratic process. We vote for our representatives at polling stations or by post, not through an online petition. Voters had the opportunity to make their voices heard on 4 July, and they did. They overwhelmingly voted for change with Labour. That is why looking forward to 2025, it is vital that the result of last year's election is respected.

I know that there will be voters who did not want a Labour Government in the first place. There will be other voters who do not agree with some of the tough decisions we have made in Government so far. But none of this means we should revisit the election result. Voters will rightly have the opportunity to judge us on our record at the next general election, and we encourage them to do this. That is the beauty of our democracy.

I would like to take some time to discuss Labour's record, because I am exceptionally proud of our initial achievements in government. It is through those achievements that we are delivering for working people—not only in my constituency of Derby South, but all across the UK. In contrast to the years of Tory chaos, we have grown-up, principled leaders in charge. That means that, across Government, we are working hard to rebuild our economy, which the Tories broke, and public services, which they absolutely decimated.

We have put working people at the heart of everything the Government do, and we have announced significant increases to the national minimum wage. At a local level, that will mean an additional £1,400 a year for more than 7,000 workers across Derby. We are working hard to rebuild our cash-strapped public services, which were damaged by Tory austerity. We have recently announced the most generous local government settlement since 2010. We have ended the junior doctors' strikes and made record investments in the NHS so that we can cut waiting lists. We are breaking down the barriers to opportunity, such as by rolling out free breakfast clubs. No child should be at school hungry.

That is not all. Whether investing in our roads, schools or the NHS, a Labour Government can deliver plenty more to be excited about in 2025. We are committed to delivering the real change across the country and building a record to be proud of. At the next general election, people across our great nation will decide who governs. There is no need for an election now; there is a need for sensible, stable, steadfast government. That is what Labour is providing.

18:01:00

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab)

It is a pleasure to have you in the Chair, Mrs Harris. I spent some time thinking about whether I wanted to speak in this debate. I thought to myself, "On our first day back, when I've got a lot to be getting on with, have I got the mental stamina to listen to Conservative Members talk about how, before Labour came to power in July, everything was rosy and bright, our public services were fine and all was glorious?" That is pretty much the sense we have heard from them so far. If their picture were true, they might not be sitting on the Opposition Benches with their party's lowest ever number of MPs and lowest ever share of the vote.

This Labour Government inherited public services on their knees, kneeling on rotten floorboards, on top of crumbling foundations, maybe with some subsidence as well. Tough decisions were always going to be needed to deal with that and to deliver the change we were elected to deliver. This Government have an immense mandate to deliver that change and to fix the foundations of our economy and public services, as more than 400 constituencies elected a Labour MP—many for the first time, including my constituency of North West Cambridgeshire.

The truth is that there are no easy fixes for the deep-seated issues that the Conservatives have left us. They ignore that, which is why we still see that short-term attitude from the Conservatives and Reform UK, which pretend that there are simple solutions that we just are not taking. The Conservatives also continually admonish us for bringing up that legacy; they literally groan every time we mention their £22 billion black hole. [Interruption.] There we go! It does not surprise me; I would not want to talk about it either if I were them, which is exactly why we will continue to do so until this mess is fixed.

Of course, they are a bit busy fighting one another right now, which the country plainly sees. A weird Christmas argument over membership numbers between Reform and the Conservatives is just the latest episode in a long-running saga, which I have no doubt will continue. Long may it continue, as it will just help more and more of the British public to see how totally unequipped to solve Britain's problems either of those parties are. Speaking of Reform, I note that the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) is present, so may I take the opportunity to offer him my sympathy over the apparent loss of a very large donation for his party from overseas, following some of that recent right-wing in-fighting? It is a very sad consequence.

I turn to the petition. I know that there is frustration in this country—lots of it—about politics not delivering for people; I met so many people during the election campaign, and beforehand, who expressed that sentiment to me. People have been let down for so long, and restoring their trust requires us to show that we can make a difference. We will. The new Government have already taken significant steps forward in fixing the foundations of our public services after the Conservatives left them in decay and decline.

For a start, we have delivered a Budget that has stabilised the economy, preventing a return to austerity, after the Conservatives left the worst inheritance for a new Government since world war two. We have announced a much-needed £22 billion increase in our NHS budget after we were left with record waiting lists. Just today, we are announcing a plethora of measures to slash those record waiting lists, just as we did last time we were in government. We have set up Great British Energy to put us on the path to clean, home-grown power, tackling climate change while many in right-wing Opposition parties deny its existence of it or at the very least the urgency of the issue.

We have appointed a border security commander to strengthen our border security after the Conservatives so abjectly failed to do so; that is one of the areas that angers me most about their record. They presided over the growth of a staggering backlog of asylum cases, diverting resources away from actually dealing with the issues in order to put them towards the totally unworkable Rwanda scheme, to try to win political capital.

Our new planning and infrastructure Bill will completely reform the planning system to ensure that we can build the homes that are needed, tackling head-on the housing crisis, which is causing so much frustration. Our Renters' Rights Bill will finally rebalance the relationship between tenants and landlords, finally reforming the private rented sector after the Leader of the Opposition admitted, in essence, that she had given up on the idea. The Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Act 2024 will bring railways back into public ownership when existing contracts with private operators expire, reforming our transport network and improving services for passengers.

In ending tax breaks for private schools, the Government are putting the additional revenue right back into our state schools to fund 6,500 new teachers, which is where the resource is sorely needed. If the Conservative party disagrees with that, I suggest that it put into its next manifesto that it will cut 6,500 state school teachers and use the money to subsidise private education, and see how that does.

Damian Hinds

Does the hon. Gentleman know by how much the number of teachers in this country increased during the last Parliament?

Sam Carling

I do not have that figure to hand, but we are going to recruit 6,500 of them, and we need them.

Damian Hinds

I will help the hon. Gentleman: it was a lot more than 6,500.

Sam Carling

No, that will do, thank you.

In six months, Labour has achieved more than the Conservatives did in 14 years. Barely a single achievement comes to mind when thinking of the Governments from 2010 to 2024. If anyone has a right to feel short-changed, lied to and let down, it is those who voted for the Conservatives in 2010, 2015, 2017 and 2019, not those who voted for Labour in 2024.

18:07:00

Mr Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I start by thanking those who organised the petition, including Mr Westwood, for securing this debate on today of all days. It is my birthday, and I can think of no better place to be, so I thank them very much for that. I also thank the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), for ably setting out the constitutional position as to when the next general election will be. We know that it will be held on or before 15 August 2029. It is the Prime Minister's decision when he wants to make a request, but the election must be held by then.

Labour did win a general election a little over six months ago with a huge mandate for the policies set out in our manifesto. We secured 9.7 million votes. In the same election, the Conservatives secured 6.8 million votes, Reform 4.1 million votes and the Liberal Democrats 3.5 million votes. Given those figures, it is perhaps no surprise that lots of people are unhappy with the outcome of the general election in July.

The reason stated in the petition was that we are not going to fulfil our manifesto promises, that we have gone back on our manifesto promises, and that is why there needs to be a general election now. That is what I will focus my contribution on; I want to address that point, because nothing could be further from the truth. We are going to make the most of the full term we have in government to deliver on the policies set out in our manifesto.

One of the first promises we made was to manage the public finances properly, to balance the books on day-to-day spending, as any responsible Government should. We knew this one would not be easy, but we are simply not prepared to continue with the fiction that no difficult decisions are required to fund our NHS properly, to rebuild our schools and to pay down the £22 billion black hole left by the former, Conservative Government. If the Opposition parties—I include all of them in this—are serious about rebuilding trust in politics and politicians, they must stop pretending that no difficult decisions are required to balance the books. They must actually set out exactly where the axe would fall if they were in government. They will not be taken seriously by the British public at the next general election unless they do.



On that point, we must remember the context in which the previous general election was called in the first place. The Conservatives thought they could get away with spending money they did not have in government: they spent the national reserve three times over in the first three months of this fiscal year. They promised compensation to the victims of the infected blood scandal without allocating a penny to pay for it, and they did exactly the same to the postmasters. They promised 40 new hospitals and did not allocate anything close to the money required to actually deliver them, and then they called an election that they thought they might lose so that somebody else could sort out the mess. We have heard it even here today: they are still pretending, even now, that they would not have given out a single penny in pay rises to our public sector workers. Our armed forces, of course, were very fortunate to receive their largest pay rise in 22 years.

Mr Francois

Will the hon. Gentleman give way? This is supposed to be a debate. Will he give way?

Mr Swards

I ask the right hon. Gentleman whether or not he would support that pay rise. I am very happy to give way—I was just coming to the end of my point.

Mr Francois

As Hansard will show, no one said that we would not have given public sector workers a pay rise. No one on these Benches uttered those words, but the £9 billion that Labour awarded was part of that supposed £22 billion figure. Does the hon. Gentleman contest that?

Mr Swards

I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The simple fact is that the Opposition have to make a decision about exactly how much they would have given in public sector pay rises. They chose to dodge that decision and hand it on to the next lot—to us. As a result, we have had to take decisions to close a £22 billion black hole that they knew full well they were leaving and that there was no way we could have known we were inheriting. Their financial mismanagement has led to this. The Conservatives have not changed and, unfortunately, given the contributions from the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues, they

appear unwilling to do so. They are not serious people. We will get on with fixing their mess and fulfilling our manifesto commitments.

Turning back to the manifesto, I encourage anybody to look at the progress we have made despite the inheritance I have set out: a 3.3% increase in day-to-day spending on public services; a record £22.6 billion for the NHS to ensure that we can put on 40,000 new appointments every week and cut waiting times; an increase in the core schools budget so that we can recruit 6,500 new teachers; a rail nationalisation Bill that takes back public control of our trains; a Renters' Rights Bill that bans no-fault eviction; a water measures Bill that punishes those who pollute our water; a crime and policing Bill to take back control of our streets; a Great British Energy Bill to deliver clean, secure energy; and the Employment Rights Bill, which delivers workplace rights fit for a modern economy so that people are protected at work. Every single one of those things was in our manifesto. It will take us five years, but we will deliver the things we set out in our manifesto.

I could go on, but I am sure Opposition Members will be very grateful and forgive me if I do not. In government, we will continue to deliver for working people. To those in my constituency who signed the petition, I say that I fully appreciate and understand their anger and frustration, but we were elected not to deliver quick fixes; we were elected to deliver long-term results for the United Kingdom. We will sort out this mess and we will leave our country in a better place than we found it, unlike the previous Government. Six months is not enough time to fix all our country's problems, but we will make real progress on them over the next four years.

18:14:00

Michael Wheeler (Worsley and Eccles) (Lab)

It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I also extend my thanks to the Chair of the Petitions Committee, the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone).

On 4 July 2024, I was proud to be elected as the Labour MP for Worsley and Eccles. I stood on a manifesto of change and, six months ago, Labour was given a clear mandate from the British people to get on with the job of rebuilding the country, fixing our public services and making work pay. There should be no doubts about the size of this task.

Fourteen years of Conservative Government have left public services in a dire condition and people feeling the pinch in their pockets. On top of that, a flurry of unfunded promises left the country with a £22 billion black hole that it is up to the Labour Government to fill. Fourteen years and £22 billion—a challenge of this scale is clearly not going to be fixed overnight.

This Government have not sat idly by for the last six months. We have started the hard work of delivering change, our manifesto promises and the better future that the people of this country deserve. Labour has committed an extra £25.6 billion of NHS funding over two years to meet our commitment to fix our broken NHS. That funding will be vital in cutting waiting times, and I was pleased to see the Prime Minister set out measures earlier today to deliver 40,000 extra appointments every single week.

Work has already begun on Labour's commitment to raise school standards for every single child. Since the election, it has been a genuine pleasure of mine to visit so many excellent schools in my constituency of Worsley and Eccles. I am acutely aware of the vital importance that my constituents place on their children receiving a high quality education. I therefore welcomed the Government's decision to increase the core schools budget by £2.3 billion next year to support the recruitment of 6,500 teachers and genuinely invest in our state schools.

As someone who regularly suffers on the west coast main line and has never understood why the failed model of privatisation was allowed to continue for so long to the detriment of customers, I was also proud to vote for legislation to fix our broken transport system, laying the groundwork for a publicly owned rail system that works for the public once again.

The Labour Government are only getting started—we are only six months in. I am proud to see the important progress being made on delivering many of the other manifesto commitments that I was elected on. Whereas the previous Government oversaw an economy blighted by insecure work, low pay and poor productivity, the Employment Rights Bill introduced by this Government will deliver the biggest upgrade in workers' rights in a generation, meeting our commitment to make work pay. Measures in the Bill—such as the end of exploitative zero-hours contracts, the end of fire and rehire, and the right to statutory sick pay

from day one of an illness—will end the poor pay, poor working conditions and poor job security that have held too many people back for too long.

In addition, a 6.7% increase in the national living wage will take effect from this April, with this Government changing the Low Pay Commission's remit so that it will now have to take into account the cost of living when setting new rates.

The Government are also taking action to provide the secure homes that people need. I welcome the Government's commitment to accelerate house building in order to deliver 1.5 million good quality homes and infrastructure. For far too long private renters have suffered from expensive, precarious and poor quality accommodation. I was proud to serve on the Renters' Rights Bill Committee, working on a Bill that will level the playing field between tenants and landlords, banning the scandal of no-fault evictions and delivering a range of new protections.

Finally, I note the introduction of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which will help break the link between young people's backgrounds and their future success, providing opportunity for all while delivering on our specific manifesto commitment of free breakfast clubs in every primary school.

Less than 200 days ago, the British people endorsed Labour's manifesto and delivered a resounding call for change. This Government are working hard to meet the commitments made at that election. I welcome the progress that has already been made on delivering the promises, and I know that there is more to come. I look forward to facing my constituents at the next general election—when it comes—and standing on my record and the record of this Labour Government. Until then, I will keep working every day for the people of Worsley and Eccles.

18:19:00

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab)  
Happy new year, Mrs Harris. I appreciate that everyone is looking forward to the final speech—perhaps this will be the final speech before the Front Benchers.

I did not know how this debate would go, so I was very interested to come here to hear what people would say. I hope it has been somewhat useful to people who are not used to being here, including those who, like me, have been here for five minutes. Like many Members here, I was elected in July, and I have a majority of 152, so I know that what I had to say was not universally popular with all the people I was standing to represent. As the Member for Chelsea and Fulham, I know that I have a lot of work to do to persuade the people of the country that what the Labour Government hope and plan to do is good, and to prove to them in the long run that we should be re-elected.

I know there is a lot of cynicism out there. We attack each other a lot of the time, but I hope we have learned some things today. How many years are we having to make up for? It is 14 years; I thought Opposition Members might have forgotten that. But today we have not really explored the crux of the motion, which is that our manifesto made promises that we have not kept—although a number of my colleagues addressed that very well in passing. My hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead Central and Whickham (Mark Ferguson) said that we must proceed on the basis of facts and that, to paraphrase him, we must be decent in doing so.

Other Members said that we are depressing, that we have talked the economy down and that we are bringing the country to a stalemate, so it is useful to remind them of what is good, positive and exciting about this Labour Government, who were brought in to effect change. I will do that in a very boring way: by reading words from the manifesto.

I used to be the deputy leader of Hammersmith and Fulham council in London. I know that nobody believes what is put in a manifesto—it is almost a given that 10 commandments come down, and the manifesto is full of lies—so we used to stick up our manifesto on the wall of the council cabinet chamber, and tick off items as we went along; anybody who came in could see us doing that. So let me tick off a couple of things that have been mentioned today. We said in the manifesto—these are the words, which I appreciate that very few people other than keen Labour candidates such as me have read—that we will

“immediately abolish Section 21 ‘no fault’ evictions”

to deal with the massive problem of the cost of rental and the crap quality of many of the places in which people are forced to live. We said that we will

“prevent private renters being exploited and discriminated against, empower them to challenge unreasonable rent increases, and take steps to decisively raise standards, including extending ‘Awaab’s Law’”—

which is about damp and mould—“to the private sector.” We have done that. We introduced the Renters’ Rights Bill. It was in the manifesto, and we have done it.

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair)

Order. Mr Coleman, I remind you that I am the audience, not the Public Gallery.

Ben Coleman

Forgive me. Thank you very much, Mrs Harris—I appreciate that reminder. I apologise to those in the Public Gallery for turning my back on them, if I may say that through you, Mrs Harris.

As we are accused of not keeping our promises, I will boringly quote from the manifesto. On new homes, we said:

“Labour will get Britain building again...We will immediately update the National Policy Planning Framework”

to enable us to build 1.5 million homes. We are bringing in the new planning and infrastructure Bill.

We said that we will

“build an NHS fit for the future...Labour’s immediate priority on health will be to get a grip on the record waiting list.”

I will not list all the things we have done; hon. Members can read tonight’s news. We have done masses and masses, including putting £25.7 billion into the NHS from money raised in the Budget. I appreciate that not everybody has liked the way we raised money in the Budget. They do not have to like it—there will always be differences of opinion—

but we have taken the money we have raised and put £26 billion into the NHS.

We also said in the manifesto that we would improve inclusivity for children with special educational needs, ensure that

“special schools cater to those with the most complex needs”,

and improve mainstream education for disabled children. Not everybody likes the way we raised the money in the Budget, but £1 million of that money has gone into improving education in mainstream schools for disabled children and children with special educational needs.

We have a problem that people do not have enough money to live on, and the minimum wage is all that many people rely on, so we said:

“Labour will...make sure the minimum wage is a genuine living wage. We will change the remit of the independent Low Pay Commission so for the first time it accounts for the cost of living. Labour will also remove the discriminatory age bands, so all adults are entitled to the same minimum wage”.

We have raised the national minimum wage and the national living wage; that is a pay boost for 3 million people. We said in the manifesto that we would do it and we kept our promise: we have done it. We have asked the Low Pay Commission to end the discriminatory age bands and to look at including the cost of living. We have talked about Great British Energy; we made pledges there, and we have delivered them by establishing Great British Energy. We said:

“Labour will fund free breakfast clubs in every primary school, accessible to all children.”

We are doing that; we are introducing free breakfast clubs. I am sorry to quote from the manifesto at such length.

Damian Hinds

What does the hon. Gentleman think should happen with free breakfast clubs in secondary schools?

Ben Coleman

I am not here to say what should happen to the free breakfast clubs in secondary schools—we can have that debate another time. I am here to respond to anybody in this Chamber who says that the Labour party is not keeping its promises; I am reading out those promises word by word.

I will talk about sewage, of which there is plenty. The manifesto says:

“Britain’s coasts, rivers, and lakes are being polluted by illegal sewage dumping... Labour will put failing water companies under special measures to clean up our water.”

We have brought in the Water (Special Measures) Bill, which has had its Second Reading and will strengthen regulation. Water companies and bosses can be fined; we can ban bonuses; and there will be new environmental standards. It is all there in our manifesto and in what we have done.

Sir John Whittingdale

I want to give the hon. Gentleman a little more time. He is very keen to quote from the Labour manifesto. Will he comment on the third paragraph of the page introducing that manifesto, which states:

“It contains a tax lock for working people—a pledge not to raise rates of income tax, national insurance or VAT.”?

Ben Coleman

This is where—[Interruption.] I’m sorry; does the right hon. Gentleman want me to answer the question? [Interruption.]

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair)

Order. Ben Coleman to resume his speech.

Ben Coleman

This is where it turns into politics. By that, I mean that we very clearly promised in the manifesto not to raise income tax or national insurance on working people—that was directly understood—but the Labour party did not promise not to raise the national insurance contributions of employers, which is what has happened. I understand the concerns and problems that has raised; I am simply saying that we have done what we said we would do in the manifesto, and we have not broken our



promises. [Interruption.] No matter how much you professional gentlemen who have been here for 20 years yell at me—I have been here for six months—it is simply the case that what is in our manifesto, which I am reading out word for word, is what we are delivering.

I will finish by talking about borders. We said:

“Labour will stop the chaos and go after the criminal gangs who trade in driving this crisis. We will create a new Border Security Command, with hundreds of new investigators, intelligence officers, and cross-border police officers.”

We have already increased the number of enforced returns of those who have committed crimes and have no right to be here; the number is up by nearly 30% on the same period last year. We have also established and invested in the Border Security Command, as we said we would. Hon. Members may disagree with the things that we have done because they do not like them and have never liked them, but do not say that we have not kept the promises in our manifesto, because we have.

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair)

Thank you, Mr Coleman. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

18:28:00

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD)  
Despite the 3 million people who signed this petition, we know that the Government will continue to stand. That said, the petition is an excellent thing, because it has let the Government know how deeply unpopular many of their policies have been. I feel that many Members on the Government side are rather ashamed of many of the things that have resulted in the petition.

People in the Labour party—its voters—feel let down; I will expand on that in a second. Who would have thought that it would be the Labour party that would cut the winter fuel payments for older and more vulnerable people? Who would have thought that charities, GPs, hospices and hundreds of thousands of smaller businesses would suffer a national insurance increase of 8.7%—almost four times the rate of inflation? It really has destroyed the economy and many of the charities. Who would have thought that the Labour party would walk away from

the commitment—maybe it was not written down but we have certainly seen the photographs—to the WASPI women?

The Prime Minister would have been a much more compassionate person, and had a much more compassionate Budget, if he had increased the top rate of tax—both the income tax for better-off people and the corporation tax for companies making hundreds of millions, if not billions, of pounds of profit. That would have been a much more compassionate decision. It would have been much more compassionate to tax the online companies that are making many billions of pounds in the UK, maybe a percentage of revenue rather than a percentage of profit—say 1.5%. Almost everybody would have understood that.

The petition cannot result in a new general election, but the Prime Minister will know he is on notice. He now has a dissatisfaction rating reaching 61%, and the economic optimism in our country is collapsing. Almost universally, the people of Britain have been appalled by this Budget. The Prime Minister and the Chancellor have let down the poorest people, charities and struggling businesses. Personally, as a Scottish MP, I am appalled that the Prime Minister has done a big job towards helping the Scottish National party win the next Scottish Parliament election—not a good job, I am afraid.

18:31:00

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con)

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Harris. I extend my thanks, as many others have done, to the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for the way he kicked off the debate. I also thank Michael Westwood, who is sitting in the Gallery, for putting the topic forward for debate. I know I should not be referring to him, Mrs Harris, but with 3 million people having signed his petition, he has clearly caught the public mood.

I would just caution some Government Members. One of them said that this was a debate on a pointless motion, but over 3 million people have signed the petition because they are really concerned about what the Government are doing. I can understand why the hon. Member for Gateshead Central and Whickham (Mark Ferguson) wants to move on from talking about whether Labour has fulfilled its manifesto commitments, but instead let us try to get away from this idea of a

blame game, because there is real concern among the public that people were misled ahead of the general election.

The Father of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), put it really well when he said that the Government should listen to people's frustrations, because there are real frustrations up and down the country among small businesses, family farms, ordinary working people and pensioners. Thousands of them in my constituency have written to me about their concerns. Although no one should be in any doubt that the Government elected six months ago are unlikely to face a general election any time soon, we should all acknowledge the massive public support that the petition has gained, with 3 million signatures. Government Members should also realise that we are now over 10% of the way into their time in office. If they do not start listening to the public, that might be 10% of their entire time in this place.

With more than 6,000 signatories to the petition in my constituency of Basildon and Billericay, and even more in the nearby constituencies of my right hon. Friends the Members for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) and for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale), it is clear that the public feeling behind the petition is based on the Government's significant early failures. That is an understandable perspective, given that the Government's primary method of governing so far has been consistently to break their biggest promises and then to blame everyone else, as my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) said. It can reasonably be argued that those promises have been broken in a manner that implies contempt for the public and has been highly damaging for trust in this Government.

The Government's failures and broken promises started early. On the morning of 5 July, the new Prime Minister walked up to the door of Downing Street and talked about a Government of service. Looking on, with a new pass and new access, was the major Labour donor Lord Alli. From the off, it has been clear that the promises of integrity, accountability and transparency from this Government have been broken. From the literal first day of the Labour Government, the public could not help feeling that Labour was selling out and selling them short.

Soon afterwards, it came to light that the Labour Government were using exceptional civil service appointment procedures to put Labour donors and activists into positions that, fundamentally, are meant to be politically neutral. The sense was that this Government, even in their first few weeks, were systematically destroying the mechanisms that hold an elected Government to account in the interests of the whole public. That sits difficultly with people in this House, but it also sits badly with the public at large.

Members will have already sensed, from their inboxes, surgeries and conversations, an immense feeling of disappointment and perhaps increasingly anger about what the public see as the Government's broken promises. Those are no longer just about direction or integrity; they are also about specific policies, as Members across the House have said. We know how frustrated the public are.

Labour clearly promised not to raise taxes, but on its entry into government that was one of the first things it did. In the Government's very first Budget, they announced an increase in employer national insurance contributions, which their own Chief Secretary to the Treasury admitted was in effect a tax hike for workers and working people, because it is a direct tax on their jobs. The Government's own Chancellor had previously described this tax that was hiked as

"a tax purely on people who go to work".

That is what it is, and that is what this Government have done, in direct contravention of their own manifesto.

The politically independent Institute for Fiscal Studies clearly stated that the tax that Labour was imposing was a clear breach of the manifesto. The Government response was to flail around about the definition of a working person. Rather than stepping up and being honest with the public—the essence of the petition that Mr Westwood initiated—this Government have failed on that very basic test of clarity and honesty.

Labour promised to stick by farmers. We all know what they did: in truth, they stuck two fingers up at farmers right across the country. Only months before being elected, the now Environment Secretary said that the Labour Government would not make changes to agricultural property relief. The now Prime Minister said that farmers deserved

better. What did Labour then do? It risked thousands of small family farms up and down the country by reducing agricultural property relief and imposing a new and fundamentally unsustainable tax on our farming community. What was the Government's response? No honesty there: I quote from the Environment Secretary, who said that farmers would have to

"learn to do more with less".

In its manifesto, Labour promised to protect the victims of crime. What has its record been so far? Thousands of early releases were massively extended, some of which were of prisoners who went on to commit violent crimes. Labour promised to deliver "better outcomes" for pensioners: those are the exact words in the manifesto. Government Members stood, in the general election, on better outcomes for pensioners. I wonder how many pensioners out there think that today.

The Labour party threw the pensioners out into the cold. The Government knew that the decision to cut winter fuel allowance for millions would lead to hundreds of thousands more in fuel poverty, in absolute poverty and in pensioner poverty. What did they do? They concealed their own analysis, which showed what would actually happen—the devastating effect that cutting the winter fuel allowance would have. The Government slipped that analysis out months after the policy had been announced, hoping that no one would notice it.

What do the Government do? They break a promise and cover it up, time after time. Energy bills are the same. What is the first duty of Government? To protect the country. What have we seen? The promise of spending 2.5% of GDP on defence has been pushed back and pushed back. The Government have been warned repeatedly that they are seriously hurting our nation's ability to defend itself, leaving us less safe. Is it any surprise that the public lose faith in a Government who leave them less safe?

Labour promised to give more opportunity to young people. All it has done is take a class war to independent schools while trying to reverse the positive reforms of the last Government, and indeed of the previous Labour Government, that helped to provide great new schools right up and down the country. They are taking opportunity away from young people up and down the country. It does not stop at the school gates:

under this Government, tuition fees have increased for the first time in more than a decade, despite the Prime Minister having said that he wanted to scrap them.

Illegal migration is another example. The Government have literally removed any deterrents we had left. They have replaced our deterrent not with a policy, but with a slogan: that they would smash the gangs. Who knows how on earth they even plan to do it?

The hon. Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson) mentioned the lower Thames crossing. I cannot believe that the decision has been put off twice already under this Government. Hundreds of millions of pounds were invested under the last Government and the decision is waiting to go. The cash is already there—it even has its own separate area of policy and spending.

Drivers are worse off. What else have the Government done on transport? For bus passengers, they scrapped the “get around for £2” scheme a few days ago, which will mean people paying an extra £10 a week at least. It will be scrapped in total in a few months’ time.

Essex colleagues have mentioned the huge hammering on housing. It was promised that local people would be consulted, yet my constituents are facing 27,000 extra homes in Basildon and Billericay. We have seen London’s housing targets slashed by 17,000, yet across the home counties there has been an increase of 18,000 a year. That does not sound like consultation with local people; it sounds like a failing Labour Mayor in London having to be bailed out by the people of Essex and the other home counties.

It is understandable that people wanted change, and fast. The petition expresses the wish of a public who want to see a Government based on honesty. That is the change they want to see: a Government who are prepared to be honest. [Interruption.] If the Minister’s Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for Swansea West (Torsten Bell), wants to speak in this debate, he should resign and take a seat on the Back Benches so he can do that.

The Government’s response has consistently been, “No, no, no—don’t worry. This is about a broader mandate. This is actually about general principles. Let’s move on from the manifesto.” Let us examine what they

said. They said that they would kick-start the economy. In fact, their missions have failed and have changed. The goalposts have been so frequently moved that it is hard to keep track. We can probably all agree that economic growth lay at the heart of what Labour was talking about in the run-up to the general election. Where is it now? It has ended: there is no economic growth. As Opposition Members have pointed out, in the six months before the general election we had the fastest growing economy in the G7. What has happened since then? Absolutely nothing. It has flatlined. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Swansea West is right to point downwards: that is exactly what his Government have done to the country.

It was interesting to hear from the hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mr Sowards), who asked about the inheritance. When we came into office, £1 in every £4 that the Government spent was borrowed. That is what a really tough inheritance looks like. This Labour Government came in when we had the fastest growth in the G7, with no deficit of 11.1% of GDP. Look at the inheritance that the last Labour Government left. My greatest fear, which I think the petitioners share, is what legacy this Labour Government will leave for our families and our country. That is what the petitioners fear: that we might see the exact same legacy.

Labour promised honesty, but instead it dished out broken promises, a Chancellor accused of lying about her experience and a Transport Secretary who was revealed to have had a criminal conviction. Frankly, it is increasingly obvious that Labour sold the country and sold the people a false promise, so it is no surprise that the petition has received so many signatures.

Sadly, the Government have dismissed the petition, just as Government Members have done today. They have dismissed the voices of the public. This Labour Government are giving the impression that they just do not care and that they feel they are above the sentiments of the public. I am sure it would be easier for the Government if the public just shut up and went away for a few years to let them get on with the job, but I have to tell the Government that on every day of this Parliament, the Opposition will hold them to account for their manifesto.

The public are not stupid. They can see exactly what is happening and what this Government are doing in office. Labour Members would do

well to take serious notice of the discontent displayed by Mr Westwood and by the over 3 million people who signed the petition. Otherwise, not only will trust in the Government fall further, but we will continue to decline and this Government will face nothing but further anger and further disappointment from the public.

18:44:00

The Minister without Portfolio (Ellie Reeves)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris.

I thank the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for moving the motion today. He did so on behalf of the signatories of the e-petition that asks for a general election, and I welcome the fact that the creator of the petition has been able to listen to this debate in the Public Gallery. I also welcome back to the House all Members who have spoken in this debate and wish you all a happy new year. I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to this petition debate on behalf of the Government.

I have yet to determine whether the Leader of the Opposition has added her name to the petition, following her comments at her third outing at Prime Minister's questions. However, I must say that opposition appears to suit her extremely well. I wish her and her colleagues many more happy years on the Opposition Benches, signing petitions to their hearts' content.

As hon. Members may be aware, I served as Labour's deputy national campaign co-ordinator in the run-up to the general election; the prospect of another general election so soon after the last one—and a return to 5am daily starts—fills me with what I can only describe as joy. Thankfully, as a number of hon. Members have said today, our political system does not work on the basis that those who do not like the result of any particular election are granted a rerun. In the words of the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice), "You back the will of the people and the losers have to consent to the winners. That is how democracy works." Without such a system, my party would no doubt have been tempted to request a rematch on many elections in recent years.



Of course, the lesson that we learned, which the Conservative party shows no sign of learning, is that the route back to government lies not in signing petitions calling for another general election but in facing up to the reasons for losing and fixing them. That is what we did under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and it is why six months ago we were elected with the largest majority that any party has secured since 1997.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton and Clyde Valley (Imogen Walker) said, we were elected with a clear mandate for change. That is what we are delivering. Indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling) said, this Government have already achieved more in our first six months in office than the previous Government managed in their 14 years in power.

The Chancellor delivered a Budget that stabilised the economy, prevented a return to austerity and protected working people's payslips. As my hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) said, we have announced £22 billion more for the NHS and ended the strike by doctors. We are increasing the schools budget by more than £2 billion. We have set up GB Energy and lifted the ban on onshore wind to help to deliver clean power by 2030.

Mike Wood

I thank the Minister for giving way. She refers to the promises made about GB Energy. Obviously, before the election the Labour party promised that its plans would result in energy costs for households being reduced by £300. When does she expect energy prices to be £300 lower?

Ellie Reeves

Achieving our target of clean energy by 2030 will not only give us energy security, so that we are not at the whim of tyrants such as Putin, but will help us to meet our targets for net zero and give consumers energy security. That is why it is central to what the Labour Government are trying to achieve and why it is one of our core missions.

We have also set up Border Security Command to smash the gangs and returned almost 13,500 people with no right to be here. We have published our national policy planning framework to pave the way for 1.5 million homes in this Parliament, accompanied by the infrastructure

to support them. We have introduced legislation to deliver the biggest upgrade to workers' rights in a generation and to transform the experience of private renting, which many hon. Members have spoken about today. And, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern), among others, has said, all that has been against an extremely challenging backdrop.

Of course, no Government choose the circumstances in which they come to office, but there is no doubt that the previous Administration left us with the worst inheritance of any post-war Government, as many of my hon. Friends have noted today: a £22 billion black hole in the public finances—not a “management challenge” as the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) would like to have us believe, but a wrecking of the public finances by the previous Conservative Government; the worst Parliament on record for living standards; an unprecedented slowdown in wage growth; NHS waiting lists at 7.6 million, with 300,000 people waiting longer than a year for treatment; new home approvals that had dropped to record lows; higher energy bills and a weakening of our energy security; shoplifting at record highs and knife crime that had risen by 86% since 2015; and an open-borders policy. They promised to reduce net migration to under 100,000 and left us with a figure almost 10 times higher. They do not like us talking about it—they groan and chunter—but that is the reality of their record.

Of course, all that has meant that the Government have had to take hard decisions. Not all of those will be popular with everyone, but we will not shy away from making the big calls that are right for the country's future, because that is what any responsible Government must do. We are not stopping there. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) mentioned, in our Plan for Change, published last month, we set out what we will deliver for the British people during this Parliament. It starts with raising living standards in every part of the United Kingdom, so that working people have more money in their pockets, no matter where in the country they live. We will also build 1.5 million homes and fast-track planning decisions on at least 150 major infrastructure projects. That is more than in the last 14 years combined.

A healthy economy must be built on a healthy population, which is why the Prime Minister set out our elective reform plan to tackle waiting list backlogs through millions of more appointments, so that the NHS once

again meets the 18-week standard for planned treatment. Feeling safe in our communities is a fundamental right for every citizen. That is why we are providing 13,000 additional officers, PCSOs and special constables in neighbourhood teams in England and Wales, so that every community has a named officer to turn to. Our Plan for Change also commits us to secure home-grown energy while protecting bill payers. We want to be on track for clean power by 2030. Finally, we are giving children the best start in life by ensuring that a record percentage of five-year-olds in England are ready to learn when they start school. That is a priority for this Government.

That is the change that the country voted for so decisively last year. That is the change we are delivering and that is what we will carry on doing. The House returned from the Christmas recess only today, so I had hoped to be able to carry through into the new year the spirit of peace on earth and good will towards all colleagues from all parties. But I am afraid that I must disappoint those who, only six months after the general election, now want a rerun. They are, of course, entitled to voice their opinions, and this Government are committed to serving everyone in the country to the best of our ability, no matter who they voted for, but, having secured such a resounding victory at last year's general election, we have not only the right but the responsibility to implement our programme and the change that the country voted for. That is what we will do, and when the next election eventually comes, we will be proud to stand on our record.

18:54:00

Jamie Stone

Mrs Harris, thank you very much. It is a winter's night and the hour gets late, so I shall be very brief indeed. In the words of Bruce Forsyth, didn't they do well? We have had a full and frank exchange of views; could you imagine that happening in the Duma, or—perish the thought—Pyongyang? That is one thing that we do very well in this country: we actually debate things properly. That is the British way of doing democracy. So my thanks go to each and every Member, on both sides of the Chamber, who spoke. My thanks also go to my fellow members of the Petitions Committee, and, in particular, to the wonderful staff who support us on it.

Finally, this debate would not have happened if it had not been for the good people out there who put their names to the petition. I think that each and every one of them can feel that tonight they have been part of democracy. That is how we do things in this country. Thank you.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 700143 relating to a general election.

**18:55:00**

**Sitting adjourned.**

**End**