

Coronavirus

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Science and Technology Committee on 17 February and 9 March, on UK science, research and technology capability and influence in global disease outbreaks, HC 136; e-petition 313310, Repeal the Coronavirus Act 2020, and e-petition 561995, Repeal Coronavirus Act and end all Covid-19 restrictions; First Report of the Women and Equalities Committee, Unequal Impact? Coronavirus, disability and access to services: interim Report on temporary provisions in the Coronavirus Act, HC 386, and the Government response, HC 1172; Fourth Report of the Women and Equalities Committee, Unequal Impact? Coronavirus, disability and access to services: full Report, HC 1050; and Eighth Report of the Procedure Committee, Back to the future? Procedure after coronavirus restrictions, HC 1282.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)

We now come to motion 2, on public health, which, with the permission of the House, we will debate with motions 3 to 5.

Before I call the Secretary of State to move motion 2 and speak to the other motions, I can confirm that Mr Speaker has not selected any of the amendments. I should also mention that there will be a limit on Back-Bench speeches not of three minutes initially, but of four minutes.

13:35:00

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock)
I beg to move,

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Steps) (England) Regulations 2021 (S.I., 2021, No. 364), dated 22 March 2021, a copy of which was laid before this House on 22 March, be approved.

Madam Deputy Speaker

With this we shall discuss the following:

Motion 3—Coronavirus Act 2020 (Review of Temporary Provisions) (No. 2)—

That the temporary provisions of the Coronavirus Act 2020 should not yet expire.

Motion 4—Coronavirus Act 2020 (One-year Status Report)—

That this House has considered the one-year report on the status on the non-devolved provisions of the Coronavirus Act 2020.

Motion 5—Proceedings during the Pandemic (No. 6)—

That the Order of 2 June 2020 (Proceedings during the pandemic (No. 2)), as amended on 1 July and 22 October 2020, the Order of 4 June 2020 (Virtual participation in proceedings during the pandemic), as amended on 1 July, 2 September, 22 October and 30 December 2020, the Order of 3 November 2020 (Proxy voting during the pandemic (No. 2)) and the Order of 25 February (Sittings in Westminster Hall during the pandemic) shall have effect until 21 June.

Matt Hancock

Over the past year, we have all been engaged in a monumental national effort to fight coronavirus, which has required the House to take extraordinary measures in response to this extraordinary threat. Today, we debate our road map to recovery and what is legally needed to take the cautious but irreversible path out of this pandemic. We propose to remove some of the emergency powers that the House put in place a year ago and set the steps of the road map that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has set out into law, replacing the existing national lockdown. We are able to take this action and propose these measures thanks to the perseverance of the British people in following the rules and the success story that is our UK vaccination programme, which has now vaccinated more than 28.6 million people—55% of all adults in the United Kingdom.

Hospitalisations are now at their lowest point since September and are down 90% since the peak. To put this into context, there are today just over 5,000 people in hospital with covid. At the peak, just two months ago, there were just under 5,000 new admissions with covid each day. Deaths are now at their lowest point since October and they are down 94% since the peak. The research published today shows that our vaccination programme has already saved the lives of more than 6,000 people across the UK, up to the end of February.

The success of the vaccination programme means that we are now able to carefully replace the short-term protection of the restrictions that we have all endured, with the long-term protection provided by the vaccine. Our goal is to be cautious yet irreversible. I must tell the House, Madam Deputy Speaker, that while I am still, by nature, an optimist, there remain causes for caution. Cases are rising in some areas and they are rising among those under 18. There are early signs of cases flattening among the working-age population, too.

I am delighted that uptake of the vaccine is now 95% among over-60s and that protection against dying from the vaccine is around 85%. Both of those figures, 95% uptake and 85% protection, are higher than we could have hoped for, but while we are confident that we have broken the link between the number of cases and the hospitalisations and deaths that previously inevitably followed, no vaccine is perfect and take-up is not 100%, so that link, while broken, is not yet severed.

New variants also remain a risk because we do not yet know with confidence the impact of the vaccine against the new variants. We all want these next few months to be a one-way route to freedom, so as we restore the freedoms that we all cherish, we must do so in a way that does not put our NHS at risk.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con)

On that point about the take-up and the efficacy, one thing that the chief medical officer said was that the timings in the road map were driven by some of the modelling that the Government had seen. The assumptions behind that modelling I think came from February and are much more pessimistic than what we now know about take-up and efficacy. Can the Secretary of State ensure that that modelling is redone with the new assumptions to see whether that would justify a faster unlocking of the country, which is important to save jobs, save businesses and maximise the economic future of our young people?

Matt Hancock

While modelling is obviously something that is looked at, the observation of the actual data is I think the best guide. The good news is that the number of deaths has fallen very sharply and continues to fall sharply, and the number of hospitalisations has fallen sharply—not quite as sharply as deaths, but nevertheless sharply. Critically, the link has broken, so the weight that we place on the number of cases as an indicator is not nearly as great as it was before, because it used to be inevitable that that led to hospitalisations and deaths.

The reason for the timings in the road map is so that, after each step, we can see its impact before being able, carefully, to take the next step. That is the core reason for the timings in the road map—four weeks to see the impact of a step, and then one week to give warning of the next step. It is that, rather than the modelling, that I put the stress on for the timings in the road map.

Mr Harper

To come back very briefly on that final point, if deaths and hospitalisations are what is important, is the Secretary of State able to confirm the information that was published in The Times this morning on the modelling by SPI-M—the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling, the Government’s advisory committee—showing a dramatic reduction in hospitalisations and deaths taking place over the next week and throughout April? That really drives my assumption that we could go a bit faster. Is he able to confirm that for the House?

Matt Hancock

I have not seen that article in The Times—I have read parts of The Times, but not that bit—so I cannot confirm, but I can write to my right hon. Friend with details on this point. However, I would stress that the focus only on modelling is not really where the ultimate judgment on the timings of the road map is; it is about being able to observe progress and then take the next step with confidence. The central point here is that cases may well rise. In fact, I would say cases are likely to rise, not least with schools going back. The critical thing is that the automaticity—cases going up having an impact on hospitalisations—is no longer there. However, if cases got extremely high, even with a much weaker link from cases to hospitalisations, that is something we clearly have to guard against and it is set out in test 3 of the Prime Minister’s four tests.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab)

The Health Secretary has talked of protections for the over-60s. Can he appreciate why, for some of our constituents who crave a foreign holiday, it looks very odd that a Stanley Johnson loophole seems to have been negotiated, so that someone over 60 with their own property abroad can get around that? Can he also appreciate that a lot of our constituents think that these measures—the Prime Minister used to talk about women who look like bank robbers—have now mandated us all to wear these masks?

Matt Hancock

I am not quite sure what point the hon. Member is making, but this is what I was going on to say. The critical point where I ended the exchange with my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) is that we must restore the freedoms that we all cherish, but in a way that does not put the NHS at risk. Throughout the crisis, we have successfully protected the NHS, and I am delighted

to be able to inform the House that there are now record numbers of NHS doctors and NHS nurses in England. New data published this morning show that there are over 300,000 nurses in the NHS in England for the first time in its history. So we have protected our NHS and we are delivering our commitments to it. Nobody wants to have to reimpose measures, as we have sadly seen elsewhere in Europe only this week, so we must follow this cautious and, we hope, irreversible road map.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con)

My right hon. Friend mentions data on occurrences within the NHS. Does the NHS have data to suggest how many people have, sadly, died from covid in NHS hospitals three weeks after receiving their first dose of a covid vaccine?

Matt Hancock

Yes, the data on the impact of the vaccine—including side effects from the vaccine and the rare occasions when, sadly, people die after having had the vaccine—are published by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. If there are any data in this area that are not published but my hon. Friend would like to be published, he can write to me and I would be very happy to look into publishing them. Essentially, we take an attitude of being as transparent as possible, because there are side effects to the vaccine as there are to all pharmaceutical drugs and we want to be completely open and transparent about those side effects—essentially to reassure people that the risks are extremely low.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con)

My right hon. Friend answered a question from me on this very subject by saying that the data was not available. I cannot understand why crucial data—such as the number of people who have been vaccinated for more than three weeks, who are then admitted to hospital and subsequently die—is not collected. Why is that?

Matt Hancock

This data has been collated recently; it is in the so-called SIREN study from Public Health England. I am very happy to look into exactly the data that my hon. Friends are looking for and, if we have it, to publish it. I think we have what has been asked for, but let us try to do this by correspondence to ensure that we get exactly what is being looked for. On the face of it, my hon. Friend is absolutely right; it is exactly the sort of thing that we are looking at, but I want to make sure that we get the details right.

As I was just saying, each step of the road map is guided by the data and the progress against the four tests. We were able to take the first step on 8 March, when we allowed the return of face-to-face education in schools, relaxed the rules on two people gathering outside for recreation and allowed care home residents to nominate a single regular visitor, supported by regular testing and personal protective equipment.

The regulations before the House today ease restrictions further—again, in a careful and controlled way. First, they allow us to put in place the remaining measures of step 1, which will come into force on Monday. That means that the “stay at home” rule will end and six people or two households will be able to meet outdoors, and outdoor sports can resume. The regulations also commit the remaining steps of our road map into law, so that we can gradually ease restrictions at the right time before eventually removing them all together, which we hope to be able

to do on 21 June.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con)

My constituents have been in touch to raise concerns about these measures being in place for longer than absolutely necessary, but they have also been raising concerns about long covid. Will the Secretary of State respond to my constituents on both issues, and explain to the House what he and his Department are looking into to better understand the effects of long covid on the population?

Matt Hancock

We clearly want to lift these measures as soon as is reasonably possible. My goal is that we will eventually see covid as something that has to be managed rather like flu. We do not put in place restrictions on normal life to tackle flu, but we do have a regular vaccination programme. With vaccines, that is where I hope we will be able to get to.

Matt Hancock

I just want to answer my hon. Friend's second point before taking further interventions. His point about long covid is important. In fact, the National Institute for Health Research, which has done a brilliant job during the pandemic, has today put out a £20 million call for further research and diagnostics, including patient and public involvement, so that long covid can be properly understood, and people who catch covid and have symptoms over a long time—which I know can be deeply debilitating for some people—can get the support they need on the NHS.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con)

My right hon. Friend mentions the fact that we live with flu every winter and act against it. Has he made an assessment of what level of hospital admissions would be consistent with protecting the NHS?

Matt Hancock

It is very difficult to know in advance. At the peak of this pandemic, we had 38,000 patients in hospital across the UK at any one time with covid, but of course that meant that other non-urgent treatments had to be delayed. There is a question of the trade-off and how much treatment is delayed. In a bad flu season, elective operations and non-urgent treatments are delayed. That is one way in which the NHS manages through a difficult flu season in winter. Measures like that will be necessary if we have an increase in covid cases.

If we have learned anything in the last year, we have learned that we have to live with risk as a society. That is a reality, so the goal and the strategy are to invest in the NHS so that it has more capacity, make sure that it can expand capacity and make sure that we have the vaccine effort and the continued efforts that people will no doubt take personal responsibility for, such as mask-wearing—and people will be highly likely do that to protect themselves and others, after the experience we have just had. I want to get to a point of personal responsibility plus the vaccine plus the test and trace programme, so that people can be regularly tested and we can use that to break the chains of transmission. I want to manage covid in that way, while restoring our freedoms. That is the best way, once we have made our way carefully down this road.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con)

What my right hon. Friend has just said is extremely encouraging, and I am very grateful. Will he confirm that the reason that step 4 is not in the regulations is that it does not need any regulations? It is freedom from these regulations.

Matt Hancock

Yes—that is a very good way of putting it; in fact, it was on the next page of my script. It is a pleasure to be as one with my hon. Friend after all this time, and I hope very much that he joins us in the Lobby later.

Mr Baker

No comment.

Matt Hancock

I am an optimist, as I just said.

Let me carry on detailing the purpose of these measures. Step 2 allows non-essential retail and personal care services to reopen. We have said that that will happen not before 12 April. It will also allow the reopening of leisure services, indoor leisure such as gyms, and self-contained accommodation. Step 2 also sees the reopening—outdoors—of our pubs and restaurants, which I know so many of us are looking forward to.

Step 3 will lift restrictions on meetings outdoors, subject to a limit of 30, and up to six people, or two households, will be able to meet inside. Indoor hospitality, indoor entertainment and all other types of accommodation will be able to open their doors once again. Step 4 will begin no earlier than 21 June. This is the final stage in the road map, because, bolstered by a mammoth testing effort and capacity and by the protection of the vaccination, that is when we aim to remove all legal limits on social contact and restore our freedoms once again.

I know how hard these restrictions have been. I know they have meant missing out on special moments with loved ones and putting important events on hold, and they have also taken a significant economic toll, so we do not want to keep them in place any longer than we judge we have to. I am therefore pleased to say that these road map regulations will expire at the end of June.

Let me turn now to the renewal of the temporary provisions in the Coronavirus Act 2020, which are also before the House today. The Act has been a crucial part of our response to this virus. It helped us to protect the NHS in its hour of need, to keep public services, courts and local democracy running and to offer the financial assistance that has been a lifeline to so many people.

Some provisions in the Act require renewal every six months. If we were to remove the temporary provisions in the Act altogether, we would lose, for instance, measures protecting commercial tenants and renters from eviction, we would not be able to run virtual court hearings, which are an integral part of maintaining the rule of law, and people would not be able to receive statutory sick pay for the full period for which they are required to self-isolate. So there are some important technical provisions that allow for the running of public services, given the social distancing we have at the moment.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab)

The word “crucial” has been doing a lot of heavy lifting in the Minister’s speech. Is it not correct that if these measures are voted down today, the Government would have 21 days to bring a new Bill to Parliament? Is it not also correct that a lot of what we are relying on comes from other legislation and not actually the Coronavirus Act?

Matt Hancock

Absolutely. The main provisions under which we put in place the lockdown come from the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984, not the Coronavirus Act. The mainstay in terms of the Coronavirus Act is to allow us to support people and public services. For instance, furlough is in the Coronavirus Act; that is not up for renewal, because it is a permanent part—it is for the full period of the Act. Nevertheless, in terms of being able to pay statutory sick pay to people when they are self-isolating, I am asking the House today to renew that provision, and I think that we must.

I want to stress this point to those who are understandably concerned about the extent of powers in the Coronavirus Act. Although the Act remains essential and we are seeking the renewal of elements of it, we have always said that we will only retain powers as long as they are necessary. They are exceptional powers. They are approved by the House for use in the most extreme of situations and they must be seen in that light. Because of the progress we have made, we are now able to expire and suspend a whole raft of measures in the Act, just as we expired provisions after the previous review six months ago.

We propose to expire 12 provisions in the Act: section 15, which allowed local authorities to ease some responsibilities around social care; section 24, which allowed biometric data held for national security purposes to be retained for an extra six months; five provisions that required information for businesses and people involved in the food supply chain; section 71, which allowed a single Treasury Minister to sign on behalf of all Treasury Commissioners—I know the Whips Office is looking forward to getting its signatures out again. There are two provisions that created a new form of emergency volunteering leave, which we have not needed and are retiring. Section 79 extended arrangements for business improvement districts and section 84 allowed for the postponement of General Synod elections. Those are not needed anymore and we are therefore not seeking to extend them. We only extend that which we think is necessary.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD)

I welcome the expiry of some measures, particularly the social care easements, which were discriminatory against the most vulnerable in our society. Will the Secretary of State accept that under the Coronavirus Act we have had 250 people wrongfully charged? The Act is full of far-reaching powers that are not needed. The practical measures he talked about can be brought forward in the next 21 days. As he suggested, the fake news that furlough cannot go on without renewing the Act is just untrue, because that is a permanent provision.

Matt Hancock

Furlough is provided for under the Act. As I just said, it is a permanent provision of the Act, but the statutory sick pay is not and I think we should be giving people statutory sick pay to help them to self-isolate.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con)

The Secretary of State is asking for a further six months under the Act, which is all that we can do. The Prime Minister has been talking in the last few days about the need for section 2, for instance, on the emergency registration of nurses, to help us to deal with the backlog. The same is true of sections 53, 54, 55 and 56 with respect to the courts. In six months' time, will we need that? Will we have dealt with the backlog in the health service and the courts, or will he need to renew this again in six months?

Matt Hancock

That is a good question. The truth is that we have a record number of nurses in the NHS, over 300,000, in part because the Act allowed for their emergency registration much more swiftly than previously. Parts of the Act have allowed us to do good things like that, which everybody would like to see. When we come to retire the Act, which we must within one year and preferably within six months, we will need to make sure we can continue to do that sort of thing to ensure that nurses can be enrolled into the NHS as easily as possible. I cannot answer whether we will be retiring it in six months. My preference would be yes, but given the last year I think a prediction would be hasty.

Steve Brine

Further to that point, may I make a suggestion to my right hon. Friend? The expansion of the availability of live links for criminal proceedings will be put into the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, so that will not be needed. The Secretary of State is bringing forward a new health Bill during the new Session. Would that be an opportunity to update that?

Matt Hancock

Yes, that is an important point. We have just started the process of working on that. If measures have worked well and we want to keep them because they are good, can we put them permanently on the statute book? That should, properly, take the process of normal primary legislation. My hon. Friend mentions a forthcoming health and care Bill. I look to the Leader of the House and I can see that he is smiling, although I cannot, of course, say whether that Bill will be brought forward until we have a proper sign-off—it is nice to see him looking so handsome there. [Laughter.] Our aim would be to get that on to the statute book, should we bring it forward, in the middle of next year, so there is a shorter-term question of the handling from here to there. We need to do that with the best administrative efficiency that we can, but I am talking here about the less controversial elements of the Act.

Mr Harper

I am grateful for the Secretary of State's judgment and I will try not to test his patience again. He mentioned that there are some very valuable administrative measures. If they were the only things being rolled forward, I do not think people would mind, although my reading of the Act is that the registration provisions for medical staff are in section 89, in the permanent part of the Act rather than the temporary part. The controversial parts include the police powers to detain potentially infectious persons, which the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) referred to, and which have been used unlawfully on a number of occasions. It says in the one-year review of the Act that those are intended to be long-term

powers and my right hon. Friend has just suggested that those provisions might be rolled forward a further six months. That is why so many of us are worried. These are extraordinary provisions, not for normal times, and they should be expired at the earliest possible opportunity.

Matt Hancock

I actually agree with my right hon. Friend that they should be expired at the earliest possible opportunity. The challenge, especially as we lift measures on all of us, is if there are, for instance, new variants that we need to pin down absolutely—in the same way that a new variant came about in Liverpool and we tackled it. We have not seen any new cases of it, not only because of fantastic local work, but because in lockdown that is easier. Having these very targeted interventions for now is important. Therefore, we have made the judgment that we should propose that they are necessary for now. I know that we disagree on that point, but I suggest that by voting against all these renewals, a whole load of valuable things that he and I would agree on would not be renewed, were that vote to go through.

Mr Steve Baker

Will the Secretary of State give way?

Matt Hancock

I will just make a little more progress.

We are also suspending three further provisions, although they may need to be restored and called on if required. As well as that, we have completed the six-month statutory review on covid-secure regulations for businesses, the collection of contact details and self-isolation, and concluded that they remain necessary at this time. The Coronavirus Act is temporary, time-limited and proportionate to the threat we face, and we are keeping measures only where they are necessary as we exit this pandemic, and then we can do away with this Act for good.

Throughout the pandemic, this House has also found a way to meet. I cannot wait for the time when this Chamber will be full and rowdy once again as the cockpit of our democracy, where we can almost literally take the temperature of the nation. I may pay for that when I say something particularly unfortunate, but I prefer it, and I think everybody in this House does. After widespread consultation and on the basis of detailed public health advice, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House has tabled a motion to extend virtual participation and the current proxy voting arrangements until 21 June, the proposed date for the removal of all legal restrictions on social contact. We thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and through you the other Deputy Speakers, Mr Speaker and the House authorities for the work that has been done in these unprecedented times to keep people safe here.

The measures before the House today show how we will put the pandemic behind us and restore life to normal. We are on the road to recovery, but we are not at the finish line yet, and by passing these measures, we can keep protecting lives and livelihoods while we get our nation back on its feet once more.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op)

On a specific point, which I rather hoped the Secretary of State would cover but I

anticipate will not, we are obviously very concerned about variants in Europe and the surge that we are seeing there. Is it the Government's intention to impose restrictions on those coming in from France or Germany—to add either France or other European countries to the red list—or to impose testing on hauliers coming into the country?

Matt Hancock

All these questions will be answered as part of the work of the global travel taskforce, which the Prime Minister has announced will be published on 5 April, so I recommend that the right hon. Gentleman waits until then. In answering that final question, I commend the motions to the House.

14:04:00

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op)

I appreciate the Secretary of State allowing me to intervene on him at the end of his speech.

It is right that this week we remember all those who have lost their lives to this horrific virus, and that we reflect on the grief of all those who have lost loved ones. Across the House we pay tribute to those who put themselves in the face of danger—our NHS, care workers, and all our public servants and key workers who have kept our society functioning.

More than 126,000 people have died. In social care, the impact has been devastating, with more than 30,000 deaths. Residents have been left isolated and frightened, deprived of visits from their loved ones for months on end. Across the NHS, cancer patients have had surgery cancelled and screenings postponed, and more than 300,000 people have been waiting for more than a year for treatment. A study today from the University of Leicester suggested that 71% of those patients who were hospitalised and discharged have not fully recovered after five months, and 20% have been left with a new disability. The long-term impact of covid is likely to be severe for many people.

Our NHS staff face burn-out, and children have lost months of education and social interaction. They risk being among the biggest victims of the pandemic. Families are worried and anxious. Our NHS has suffered. Public health funding has been cut for many years, which left our public health services without the capacity they needed when the pandemic hit. The poorest communities saw more than double the death rate in the first wave of the virus, and in ethnic minority communities the death rate has been up to 50% higher. It did not have to be like that. A healthier more equal society would have weathered the storms better. We could have planned better, acted more quickly, and responded more comprehensively.

Our vaccination programme has been successful, and again I thank everybody who has been involved in that. But the reality is that we are not yet out of the woods. The pandemic still has some way to go, and it is right that we proceed with caution and do not become complacent. Vaccination alone does not make us bullet-proof. It makes us safer, but we are not safe until we build population immunity and roll out vaccinations everywhere across the world.

Last week I asked the Secretary of State about the vaccination of children, and he

rightly said that we had to wait for the research and clinical trials. Yesterday it was suggested that the vaccination of children could start as soon as August, if safety requirements are met. I hope Ministers are commissioning the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation to produce a plan for how children's vaccinations could roll out. That will be an important way to drag down transmission.

A third wave is surging across Europe, much of which is due to the B117 Kent variant. Increasingly, we are seeing higher prevalence of other variants, and as the Secretary of State rightly said, we are uncertain about whether they will evade the vaccines. We therefore have to be careful and proceed with caution. Although we are making extraordinary progress in this country with our vaccination rates and in bringing infection rates down, we know that the virus mutates and that it could come back and hit us even harder, particularly at a time when a considerable amount of virus is circulating.

Infections are still running at more than 5,000 day, and last week the Office for National Statistics estimated that 160,000 people in England had the infection in the past week. We must still work hard to break transmission chains and shut down opportunities for the virus to replicate. Given the loss of life we have suffered, and the risk of mutations that could set us back, we must have zero tolerance of letting the virus rage unchecked. For that reason, Labour accepts that restrictions must stay in place, and we will support the renewal of the Coronavirus Act 2020 and the public health regulations.

We do not support that renewal with any enthusiasm or relish—quite the opposite. Neither the Secretary of State nor I came into politics to put powers such as these on the statute book. These powers curtail so many basic freedoms and deregulate so many basic standards for which our forebears fought so hard and that so many people have taken for granted.

I am also acutely conscious that this deadly virus spreads rapidly, exploits ambiguity and thrives on inequality. Suppressing the virus does depend on social distancing measures, which is why we need them on the statute book, but it depends on other measures as well, such as properly isolating the sick and paying them fully to isolate. It depends on having proper community-led contact tracing, both retrospective and looking forward. It depends on investing in science, so that we have not just the vaccines but the therapeutics that will lead us out of this crisis.

Restrictions in themselves are a blunt tool, but sadly they will be needed, given that the virus is still surging across the world. That is why we supported the measures 12 months ago and will support them again today. Indeed, it was 12 months ago that I met regularly with the Secretary of State. It was just over 12 months ago that I sat round a very small table in the Prime Minister's office in Downing Street with the Prime Minister and the then Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), alongside advisers such as Dominic Cummings and others, to negotiate the content of the Act.

We pressed for statutory sick pay from day one, and that is in the Act. We think that the Government should go further—it is not enough, but at least we have statutory sick pay from day one. We pressed for a ban on evictions for those in rent arrears, and again, the Prime Minister gave us that concession. We pressed for

furlough as well in that meeting. On each of those, I want the Government to go much, much further, and it is a monstrous failure that decent sick pay and financial support have not been provided over the past 12 months, but it would be churlish of me not to recognise that we had that meeting and that concessions were offered as a result of it.

Even though we supported the Act 12 months ago, I raised at the Dispatch Box a number of concerns about its content and said that, in different circumstances, with a proper process whereby Members could table amendments in good time, we would have hoped for better scrutiny of it. We raised concerns about the easements of the Care Act 2014, and I am pleased that those clauses will be removed. We raised objections to the Coronavirus Act giving the Secretary of State powers to change section 42 of the Children and Families Act 2014. I understand that those powers have not been used since July last year, but we remain concerned that they appear still to be in the Act. I ask the Secretary of State and Ministers to reflect on that and to take those clauses out of the Act.

We also raised concerns about the more draconian elements of the Act. Indeed, I said at the Dispatch Box a year ago:

“The Bill contains the most draconian powers ever seen in peacetime Britain—powers to detain and test potentially infectious members of the public...powers to shut down gatherings, which could impede the ability to protest against the overall handling of the crisis or against the abuse of the powers themselves. It needs no explanation and very little imagination to understand the huge potential for abuse that such powers and others in the Bill, however well intended and needed, still give rise.”—[Official Report, 23 March 2020; Vol. 674, c. 59.]

Sadly, we have seen such abuses. Schedule 21, which gives the power to detain potentially infectious persons, has been used for a number of prosecutions, every one of which was found to be unlawful when reviewed by the Crown Prosecution Service. The Joint Committee on Human Rights advised in its report of September last year that

“In the absence of any clear evidence to support the retention of these powers”—
the schedule 21 powers—

“they ought to be repealed.”

We have huge sympathy with that, as do Members who have contributed to the debate so far, and we urge the Government to look again at that schedule.

Mr Steve Baker

I am grateful for what the hon. Gentleman just said. I am very sorry—although I completely understand it—that my amendment on schedules 21 and 22 was not selected, because we probably would have gone through the Lobby together on it. Could he advise the Secretary of State on whether he would vote to call upon Ministers to remove those schedules, should such a question come before the House?

Jonathan Ashworth

I understand why we should want to deal with somebody who is infectious and

refusing to isolate, but I do not think the schedule and the way it has been applied is needed. That needs to be looked at again.

I make a broader point. Although I understand why the Government have to put, or maintain, these restrictions on the statute book, and I am a strong believer in doing all we can to suppress the virus, drive down infections, cut transmission chains and prevent opportunities for it to replicate—I am a strong believer in putting public health and prevention first—I also think that the Government could have found time for this debate to take place in the House over a couple of days, so that Members could table amendments and we could properly scrutinise the legislation. The Government have a rather handsome majority; I am sure they would have got their way on most things, but who knows? Perhaps through proper scrutiny we might have improved the legislation.

Mr Baker

The hon. Gentleman might know that I have proposed a new public health Act that would use statutory instruments of the type under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, which would allow us to amend them. Would he support that proposal?

Jonathan Ashworth

The hon. Gentleman invites me to offer endorsement before I have read the details—he is a canny operator in this place—but in principle his suggestion sounds reasonable. I look forward to no doubt receiving an email from him later today, which I will be able to read when I am on the train back to Leicester.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab)

My hon. Friend is giving us an interesting insight into the history of the epidemic in this country and the discussions that took place. Would he care to put it on record that we should immediately start an independent public inquiry into what has gone on so that we can get a full picture? It is a feeble excuse to say that people cannot attend a public inquiry when virtually every Select Committee in this House is having witnesses every day.

Jonathan Ashworth

My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we need a public inquiry. Mistakes have been made. There have been examples of poor decision making. When we went into the crisis, our health and social care capacity was less than it should have been, and our public health capacity, after cutbacks over many years, was lacking. We were late going into lockdown a year ago; maybe that was not unreasonable, but we were also late going into lockdown the second and third time. Of course we need a public inquiry to get to the bottom of all these matters.

The Secretary of State is embarking on a reorganisation of the national health service. Yesterday, he made an interesting speech about the future of public health, which he opened by saying that one lesson of this crisis is that we need to set up a national institute of health security. I agree with him on health security, as it happens, but the Government cannot, on the one hand, say that they have learned lessons from this crisis and they need to do X, Y and Z while, on the other hand, the Prime Minister says it is too early to learn lessons and we cannot have an inquiry. My hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) is absolutely right and I totally agree with him.

We have concerns about schedule 21 of the 2020 Act, but we are where we are, and the procedures of the House leave us little room for manoeuvre, so we will support the Government in the Division Lobby, should it come to that, albeit that we would rather not be in this situation.

Schedule 22 is another schedule that is open to abuse, and I hope the Government will review it and come forward with alternatives; given recent events, the power it contains on gatherings has caused understandable concern. However, some progress is offered by the public health regulations, which expressly include—I think for the first time, and in relation to each step of lockdown relaxation—the right to gather for purposes of protest. That is welcome but, to be frank, it should have been there all along. I have some concerns that, to comply, organisers must take into account, in the words of the regulations,

“any guidance issued by the government relevant to the gathering”,

which means that the Government, through guidance, which could be general or specific to a particular protest, can determine what is allowed by way of protest. I hope the Minister, who is a decent man and a fellow Leicestershire MP, can offer us some guidance on that in his response.

Notwithstanding our concerns, we understand why the 2020 Act must stay on the statute book and why the public health regulations must receive the support of the House today. The pandemic is not over. The virus is surging again. Deaths are increasing across the world after going down for some weeks. Mutations could emerge, which could bounce back at us and set us back considerably. Although they would probably not put us back to square one, they could evade the success of our vaccination programme. A year ago, I concluded my remarks by observing:

“The crisis has exposed the vulnerability of a society in which insecure work is rife, deregulation is king and public services are underfunded. When we come out on the other side, as we will, we have to build a society that puts people first.”—[Official Report, 23 March 2020; Vol. 674, c. 61.]

Rebuilding that society becomes ever more urgent every day.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton)
The four-minute limit will now be on for Back-Bench speeches.

14:20:00

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con) [V]
It has certainly been a challenging time for my constituents in North Herefordshire, but their fortitude and community spirit must be highly commended. It is a triumph that vaccines were produced and approved in record time, and this was the silver bullet I have been asking for in all my speeches to this House for so many months. We are all so proud that ours is one of the world’s most successful vaccine roll-outs. Therefore, it is disappointing not to see more justification from the Government as to why the Coronavirus Act needs to be extended for as much as another six months. People must be able to understand the exit from lockdown and understand that these powers are for their own good. This is especially true when the most vulnerable in society have been vaccinated with the first of two jabs

against this dreadful disease. Thanks to the work of the vaccine taskforce, the pharmaceutical companies, NHS staff and volunteers, and the regulators, we should all be truly proud of our world-beating vaccine roll-out programme. Herefordshire continues to top the list as one of the areas with the highest vaccination rates. More than 91,000 people in Herefordshire have now received their first dose; nearly 100% of the first five categories laid out by the JCVI have been jabbed, as have more than 61% of the 55 to 59 category. Some 28.6 million people have now been vaccinated in this country, saving nearly 6,000 lives. Nearly 850,000 people received a dose on Saturday alone, and I had my first injection today.

Now we must capitalise on this success and the global opportunities it creates for the UK. The roll-out of the vaccine was always going to change the game, and it is doing the job required of it. Let us not now miss the chances that this golden opportunity presents. We are free from the EU, and we can manoeuvre economically and commercially, safe from covid-19. Globally, this is an almost unique advantage for our businesses, which have been supported throughout the crisis. Now, let us make sure that we can collect on our investment. From 9 March to 15 March, Herefordshire had a covid case rate of 34 per 100,000. When we entered the latest set of restrictions, the county's rate was at 254 per 100,000. Now, there are only 58 cases in the county. On 10 May 2020, the Prime Minister announced a relaxation of some of the lockdown measures. At that time, the R rate was between 0.5 and 0.9, whereas on 15 March the county had a rate of between 0.6 and 0.9. On 10 May 2020, the seven-day average for hospital admissions was 987.3, whereas now it is 426.1.

The country had restrictions lifted the first time around in very different circumstances last year. Given that children are back at school and the vaccine roll-out is so successful, we are actually in a safer place than we were last May, and because of the good behaviour of the people of this county, we need to capitalise on this. We are doing so much better than Europe. When we look at the statistics, we see that our record is fantastic. That is why I will dig deep into the loyalty vault and today vote with the Government, but we need to remember that we need to keep the people properly informed as to why these restrictions are necessary. I would love to hear the Government do more of that.

14:24:00

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]

It is hard to believe that it is a year since the four nations officially went into lockdown. I would like to take this opportunity to say thank you to everyone for everything they have done to support us and the NHS during this unprecedented period: everyone who helped out, be that by staying at home or continuing to go to work to allow others to stay at home, and those who volunteered or supported our NHS. I am truly grateful to everyone whose effort has assisted in whatever way.

Over that year, many have lost loved ones to covid, with 126,000 covid-related deaths to date, and regrettably this figure is still rising. Many will also have lost loved ones to other causes too, and irrespective of whether the losses were related to covid, the grieving process has been even more complex and stressful than it would otherwise have been. My thoughts and prayers are with them too.

On a personal note, I look forward to receiving my first vaccine dose next week. There are some advantages to turning 50 this week, it seems. The continued vaccine

roll-out offers us all a realistic hope for the future to come, and I encourage everyone who is offered a vaccine to take up the offer.

I recognise that Governments globally have had to make some very difficult choices over the past year, and unfortunately these difficult choices endure because the virus has not yet gone and will remain with us for some time to come. As it mutates into potentially more harmful variants and we witness countries entering a third wave, current decisions continue to require consideration of competing challenges. That said, I think it fair to say that we are on the road out of lockdown—perhaps not as fast as some would like, but there is a delicate balance and we have to get this right. It is inevitable that as we unlock there will be a rise in cases, so successful roll-out of vaccinations and protection of the most vulnerable is essential.

To that end, I urge that for continued suppression of the virus in the UK as we come out of lockdown, the UK Government should follow the Scottish Government's example on hotel quarantines. A Public Health England study showed that quarantine-free travel corridors contributed to the spread of coronavirus in the UK last year, with travel from European countries accounting for 86% of imported cases between May and September, and now England's Deputy Chief Medical Officer has told MPs that 68% of those arriving from France were exempt from quarantine measures. Data shows that South African and Brazilian variants that may be more resistant to vaccines now account for 40% of new cases in some regions of France.

My SNP colleagues and I have repeatedly called for the UK Government to follow Scotland's lead and bring in supervised quarantine for all arrivals to the UK to prevent the spread of covid-19 variants and save lives, but we have been ignored. If the Prime Minister will not listen to us, he should at least listen to the experts who are advising that the best way forward is to implement tougher border controls to stop mutant strains being imported to the UK. Huge numbers of people are still being allowed to enter the UK without the proper public health checks. This is dangerous. The Scottish Government have followed the science and done what they can within their power, but this will not stop new strains coming into Scotland via other parts of the UK. We need Westminster to act. By continuing to ignore expert advice, the Westminster Government are putting Scotland and its recovery at risk.

The Prime Minister must stop dithering, heed the calls and bring in a comprehensive system of supervised quarantine for the whole of the UK to stop us going backwards and to save lives. I cannot stress this enough. Having tougher quarantine restrictions for incoming travellers is a scientifically sound, sensible and overwhelmingly publicly supported option. The UK Government must change their position to ensure that imported cases are kept down as we reopen. Given how highly infectious coronavirus is, general anti-virus measures may be needed until a sufficient proportion of the population is vaccinated—perhaps 70% or more.

It is therefore crucial that unlocking must be data and not date driven, so I am somewhat nervous when I hear the PM and Ministers use phrases like “irreversible road map out of lockdown”. This does not sound data driven to me and risks repeating previous mistakes. It was the Prime Minister's refusal to follow SAGE advice in September that delayed lockdown and allowed the Kent variant to take hold. We must learn those lessons.

Businesses and individuals must continue to be helped through the remainder of restrictions. With health measures and covid restrictions being devolved matters, I stress that while restrictions continue in any part of the UK, support must too. While I welcome the extension of furlough in the spring Budget, it should be continued for as long as it is needed. There must also be sector-specific support for aviation, hospitality and tourism. There is much more I could say on these matters, but time is short and I wish to cover the other motions being considered today.

Those of us in the SNP have serious concerns about the lack of parliamentary scrutiny of the powers contained in the UK Government's Coronavirus Act, and we raised our concerns on Second Reading. The reviews must not be a rubber-stamping exercise; they must have the teeth to provide meaningful scrutiny, protect human rights and promote public health. It is important that Parliament has its say so we have stronger regulations in place to tackle the biggest health emergency we have seen in our lifetimes. The Government are under huge pressure, but their decisions need the insight and legitimacy of Parliament. I say that not in an attempt to hamstring the Government, but to help them to do better.

Giving Parliament the ability to scrutinise schedules and measures individually would go a long way towards that. That it does not have that ability is, in my opinion, simply unacceptable. For example, the SNP supports repeal of schedule 21, which contains very broad police detention powers. Those have clearly proven problematic, with schedule 21 having been used for 246 prosecutions, every single one of which was found unlawful by the Crown Prosecution Service. That is as unprecedented as it is unacceptable. I point out that Scottish police have not used schedule 21 powers in Scotland, and that alternative laws could be used in lieu of the schedule.

The Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020 contains a range of measures to ensure scrutiny of Scottish Government decisions, including the publishing of two-monthly reports to the Scottish Parliament on all Scottish statutory instruments made for a reason relating to coronavirus. Also, where possible, provisions in the Scottish coronavirus legislation have been suspended or expired when they have fulfilled their purpose or when the Scottish Government have listened to the compelling views supporting change. The UK Government should consider how similar scrutiny and accountability processes can be introduced in this House.

In conclusion, we are not out of the pandemic yet—it will be with us for some time to come—although I think it is fair to say that we are on the road out of lockdown. But we have to get this right, so more needs to be done to restore public trust in the handling of issues such as covid contracts and in the security of powers contained in the Act. There needs to be reassurance that errors over timing of lockdowns will not occur again. But above everything else, we need to act now to stop new strains coming into the country, so I urge the Government to think again on measures at the borders.

14:32:00

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con)

As sure as eggs are eggs, we will be back here in six months, at the end of

September, being asked to renew this legislation again. It is inevitable, and anyone who thinks it is not is deluding themselves. But this afternoon I am not here to talk about eggs; I want to talk about milk.

In the remaining days of this lockdown, I am going to allow myself an act of defiance—my own protest, which others may join me in. I am going to protest about the price of milk. I am not sure whether I think the price is too high or too low—I shall come to that decision later—but for the next few days I am going to walk around London with a pint of milk on my person, because that pint will represent my protest. There may be others who will choose, too, to walk around London with a pint of milk on their person, and perhaps as we walk past each other in the street our eyes might meet. We might even stop for a chat. But I was thinking to myself, and I will continue to think to myself, what will their pint of milk represent—what will their protest be? Perhaps they will be protesting the roaring back of a mental health demon, brought on by lockdown. Perhaps they will be protesting a renewed battle with anorexia, with depression, with anxiety, with addiction. Perhaps, with their pint of milk, they will be protesting the lack of agency in their life—not being able to make a meaningful decision; maybe a loss of career or job or business. Maybe they will be protesting this country's slide into authoritarianism, or perhaps they will be protesting the fact that we allow unelected officials to have lecterns at No. 10 to lecture us on how to live our lives. But there might even be people, with their pint of milk, quietly protesting that the route out of lockdown is too slow, or perhaps even too fast. You see, the point is, Madam Deputy Speaker, that these people can project what they like—what concern they have—on to their pint of milk.

My protest, as I said, will be about none of those things. It will simply be about the price of milk and, as I said, for the next few days I will have that pint on me, it will be of symbolic importance to me, and at the end of the day it will be warm, it will have suppurated, and I can choose whether to drink it or pour it away, because it will be robbed of its refreshing elegance by the time it has been in my pocket for 12 hours. And if I pour it away, that might cause people some concern, but it does not matter because it is my pint of milk and it is my protest, and I am not seeking people's acclaim, endorsement or support in my protest.

And you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, I heard and I listened to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. This will pass; my protest will pass, the pandemic will pass, and in years to come I will be sitting at my kitchen table—perhaps with my wife, and hopefully my children, who will still want to see me—and I will break away from our excited conversation about the day because I will spot that pint of milk on the table, and that pint shall remind me that the act of protest is a freedom—a freedom, not a right, and unless you cherish freedoms every day, unless you fight for freedoms every day, they end up being taken away from you.

14:37:00

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab)

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker).

On 7 March in Manchester there was a demonstration, not about milk but about the pay of NHS staff. Karen Reissmann, a political opponent of mine at general

elections, was arrested and served with a fine of £10,000. That is an extraordinary attack on civil liberties. The very small group of people at the demonstration were socially distanced. Professor Woolhouse has told the Science and Technology Committee that while no risk is zero, the risk of catching covid-19 in the open air is minimal. We need to stop these restrictions now. That is one of the reasons why I will not be voting for the Government's proposals.

The second point I want to make is about the Government's statement that they believe in "data, not dates". That is a curious thing for them to say, because when you look at what they say, there is no data there. There are dates—lots of dates—and when we have asked Ministers and scientists, how we, as parliamentarians can check the data to see whether things are going well or badly, and so that we can ask for it to be speeded up, no information is given to us. Quite simply, it is a slogan. The Government should be telling us what level of admission into intensive care, what level of infections, what level of hospital admissions and what level of vaccinations could lead to us being freed earlier. That is another reason why I will not be voting for the proposals before us; they are not giving Members of Parliament the tools that they need to deal with this.

My third point, in some ways my most fundamental point, is that we have only ever been given one side of the story. People have died of covid, but if we look at what the cancer charities are telling us at the present time, we will see that at least 50,000 people are expected to die because they have not been tested over the past 12 months. Every area of health service provision has been diminished because of the actions that have been taken on covid.

I cannot get past this point without also highlighting what Patrick Vallance told the Science and Technology Committee. If we had had the same level of intensive care facilities as Germany and France—they have about five times the level that we have—many of those other services could still have been provided. We have lost jobs. School children will suffer for the rest of their lives—hopefully not, but I think that that is the case—because of what has been done to protect people.

I cannot support what the Government propose. The big reason behind it, I suppose, is that Governments can get a taste for authoritarianism and for large powers. I do not want them to get a taste for that. I want this to be the end of it. I would like it to be the end of it today, or in six months, or on 21 June. I think that is unlikely, but I do not want this or any other Government to think that we should give these powers to a Government ever again.

14:41:00

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con)

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer).

I originally put in to speak in this debate because of the procedural motions. I expected there to be a separate debate on the procedural motions and therefore, as Chair of the Procedure Committee, I was expecting to make some comments. As there are other things to debate, I shall mention some other things.

On the procedural motions, the motions that have been tabled are in line with the

report issued by my Committee. I do have to point out that there was a division in the Committee. It was the majority of the Committee, not the entire Committee, that wanted to see the motions in the way that they are tabled today, but that is what the Committee decided and I am pleased that the Government have acted on that. Some may think it odd that they are the only motions that we are debating today that actually end on 21 June, but I will come on to that point later.

I also make the point—I hope that those at the Whips' end of the Treasury Bench will listen to this—that, yesterday in the Liaison Committee, the Prime Minister committed to a debate in the future so that we can consider whether we want to continue with some of the procedural things that we have been doing over the past 12 months. There may also be other procedural changes that we want to make. The Prime Minister committed that such a debate should happen.

In my remaining two-and-a-bit minutes let me move on to the main event of the day. First, let me make the point that, when we pass laws in this place, they are the law of the land. We cannot say that we do not want them to be enforced. We cannot say that we would like them to be ignored. We expect law enforcement and others to enforce the laws that we pass. The difficulty with these laws is that they are contrary to the way that we normally carry out laws. Under the common law system, one is free to do whatever one wishes unless the law says otherwise. These laws are Napoleonic. They give us permission to do certain things. They say that we can do nothing unless we have permission to do it. That has led to enormous confusion, enormous difficulty, for people. It has meant that the interpretation of these rules has been very difficult for all of us. I will just say that, while I understand that we must have the rules in place—perhaps in a pandemic it is impossible to do them in any other way—we should not be critical of those who enforce the rules that we make in this place if we do not like the way that they are enforced.

Secondly, let me talk about the amount of time that we have for debate. Three-and-a-half hours for a debate on these topics is simply not enough. The length of the call list makes it easy to see just how many Members wish to take part. I say to the Minister for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), that the Government should not be frightened of amendments, because if an amendment is proposed that has the support of the majority of the House and the Government cannot find a good reason to say no to it, it is probably a good amendment. I suggest that the Government think about providing more time for debate and more opportunities to amend. I do not agree with every single thing in these measures, but I will support the Government today. The Secretary of State's opening remarks were very conciliatory, and they set out very clearly the direction of travel, and I will therefore support the Government.

I want to make a final point about managing public expectation. I had my vaccine on Saturday—I was one of the large number of people who did so—and one of the volunteers in my vaccine centre said to me, "Now you've had the vaccine, you can vote against the stupid restrictions." People are expecting that these restrictions will end. They are queuing up in droves to get their vaccine, because that is the end of these lockdowns. That is their passport out of the pandemic, and the Government need to make that happen.

14:45:00

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind) [V]

A year ago, the House gave the Government unprecedented powers to curtail and limit economic activity and our normal liberties, and placed huge responsibilities on our public services to deliver us from the dangers of the pandemic. A year later, we are not properly scrutinising this legislation. We are not apparently debating any amendments to it, and we have been given a take-it -or-leave-it approach by the Government, which is unacceptable in any democracy. Earlier this week, the renowned human rights group Liberty produced a very good document that suggested a better, alternative way of approaching this, and my great friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) introduced it earlier this week as a Bill in this House.

I represent a densely populated inner-urban constituency. My local authority, Islington Council, my local hospital, the Whittington Hospital, and others have performed wonders during the past year in supporting people through this desperately difficult time. Volunteers, through mutual aid groups, have done fantastic work. They have organised and run food banks very efficiently, provided mental health support and supported our NHS workers. They are the very best of our society.

The effects of lockdown are not even across the whole country, however. If you live in a good-quality suburban house with a garden and plenty of space, working at home is difficult but it is not the end of the world. If you have space for your children to study, it is okay but not great, because they ought to be in school. We understand that. But if you are a family with three or four children living in one or two-bedroom flat with no balcony, no open space, insufficient computer access and insufficient income because of the coronavirus crisis, it is a very different story indeed. They are the children underachieving in school and the people going through a mental health crisis and, sadly, that has led to an increase in domestic violence. I have raised these matters before during debates and questions on this.

Overall, the Government's record through the pandemic has been lamentable. They did not take seriously what the World Health Organisation was telling them in January last year, 15 months ago, and their levels of incompetence over the provision of PPE and their handing out of massive contracts to the private sector for the failed track and trace do not inspire confidence. We say well done to the scientists who have developed the vaccines and to those administering the vaccine programme as we speak, but why are the patents for these vaccines going to continue to be held by the private sector when the public have invested so much in them? Why are the poorest people in the poorest parts of the world not getting any access to these vaccines at all?

We should review this situation. It has brought out the best and worst of our society. Healthcare workers and others are now rewarded with a pay cut as a result of this. We need instead an approach that increases statutory sick pay and universal credit, guarantees decent housing and recognises the fact that those refugees and migrants without access to public funds also need to be protected. Our liberties are at stake under this Act. Why on earth could the Government not at least review section 21 on the powers of the police to prevent protest and demonstration? We need to live in a free society in which people can express their wishes. That surely is the very least we can expect from this Parliament and this Government. That is why I will not be supporting this legislation when we are

invited to vote on it later today.

14:49:00

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con)

What an extraordinary thing! This evening, I imagine I will find myself in the Lobby with the right hon. Gentleman who spoke before me, although he will do it by proxy, I presume, and, perhaps more concerningly from my perspective, with the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), who is to follow me.

It is an eccentric thing, I suppose, to talk in this House about beliefs and fundamental rights, but if we cannot talk about such esoteric things in the House of Commons, what on earth can we talk about, except that we have been reduced to the Facebook Commons, with clips and YouTube, in recent times?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) was spot on in her characterisation of the Napoleonic code under which we now live. Further, she was correct to suggest that UK law tends to say what it is unlawful to do. Indeed, rights and freedoms are not in the ownership of the state, but are innate.

The hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) brought to our attention the matter of protest in Manchester, which was an extraordinary situation to have arisen because of poorly drafted law that this House, not in its wisdom, decided to pass. Indeed, I liked his aside about data, not dates. Hope springs eternal.

Yesterday at the Liaison Committee, a stir was created—it could have been deliberate—when the Prime Minister floated the idea of covid vaccine certification to visit the pub. Of course we should encourage the take-up of the covid vaccine. What a miraculous achievement and what great foresight the Government had on that particular aspect. Indeed, in the recess next week, I shall be volunteering as a car park marshal—such is the level of my competence on these matters—at one of my local covid vaccine centres.

I cannot help but think we have a back of fag packet-esque approach to this whole question of covid vaccine certification. If I may be so bold, I suggest that as the Conservative party, we might actually think about what we believe in as a party, and not let ourselves be carried away by a utilitarian urge that seems to have swept across the Treasury Bench, leaving very few standing.

I will leave the matter there, but on the matter of the Procedure Committee, on which it is an honour for me to serve as a member under the very able chairpersonship of my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands, we did indeed produce a report that was subject to, I think, 14 separate votes. I had the temerity to table amendments to that particular report. All I would say in ending is that in paragraph 26, we said:

“We recommend that the House reverts to all aspects of its pre-pandemic practice and procedure.”

Let us hope the same can be said for our freedoms as citizens, too.

14:53:00

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD) [V]

Renewing the Coronavirus Act 2020 is about extra powers for Ministers—powers that have serious implications for people’s freedoms but are not crucial to help the fight against covid. The Liberal Democrats will of course vote against this motion tonight.

We have supported any necessary powers to keep people safe throughout this crisis. Indeed, a year ago we supported the original Coronavirus Bill, albeit with a very heavy heart. While we have sometimes had to accept that such public health actions were needed to preserve people’s liberty to survive this pandemic, we have always sounded a liberal warning.

A year ago in the debate, I said about the Bill that

“the powers must be used only when absolutely necessary during this emergency, and not for a moment longer.”—[Official Report, 23 March 2020; Vol. 674, c. 79.]

The experience of the past year shows that many of the powers that the Government still want to keep have proved totally unnecessary, including the extraordinary powers for police and immigration officers to detain innocent people potentially indefinitely. The Government themselves say that such powers have not been used once in the whole pandemic, yet they are still asking MPs to renew them for another six months. These unnecessary powers are causing enormous confusion for police and prosecutors. The Crown Prosecution Service’s review reveals that, as of the end of February, 252 people had been incorrectly charged under this Act, with not a single person correctly charged.

I do welcome the fact that Ministers at last accept that a few of the provisions should expire, especially the reduction in people’s rights to care. I warned on Second Reading last year that these were

“some of the most alarming provisions in the Bill.”—[Official Report, 23 March 2020; Vol. 674, c. 79.]

We called on the Government to remove them last September, when we showed that they were illegal under international law, so I am glad they have gone.

However, the Government still seem determined to keep most of these unnecessary draconian powers. Indeed, what is disturbing is that Ministers are now resorting to desperate false arguments to persuade MPs to vote for this motion. Ministers said that voting it down would end furlough; it will not. Yesterday, the Prime Minister said it was needed for people to carry on volunteering in the NHS; that is not true. This is fake news, and this House should not fall for it.

There are some parts of the Act that are needed, but that is not justification for renewing all these sweeping and intrusive powers for another six months, not least because there is an alternative. Liberty has published a protect everyone Bill to replace the Coronavirus Act. It contains the laws necessary to protect both public health and human rights. That is the law we should be debating, as our amendment

calls for.

Conservative Ministers are asking for a blank cheque for another six months, so I really hope that Conservative Back Benchers, and indeed Labour and SNP colleagues and others across the House, will do what the Liberal Democrats are going to do, and that is not support this Bill. We will vote against this motion, and I hope Conservative Ministers go away and think again, and put liberty first.

14:56:00

Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con) [V]

This debate is not about the Government's response to covid-19 so far, but about what we do next. The most significant shift in the situation we face today is of course the success of the vaccination programme, for which all involved deserve credit, but my concern is that the logic of that success has not found its way into the approach to lifting the covid-related restrictions on our daily lives.

Before significant progress was made on vaccination, the primary driver in our response to the virus was to prevent or to minimise transmission, and that was clearly right when transmission in any part of society was likely to lead to the infection, hospitalisation or death of those most vulnerable to the virus. However, the Government have—rightly, in my view—prioritised those most clinically vulnerable in the vaccine roll-out, meaning that, by the end of April, those accounting for 99% of mortality from the virus will have received at least one dose.

We know that the vaccine is effective and we know that take-up is very high among vulnerable groups, as the Secretary of State confirmed earlier, so by the end of April we know that the level of protection given to those most likely to die or be hospitalised by this virus will be very extensive. We know, too, that those remaining unvaccinated will overwhelmingly be younger and less vulnerable to that virus, and that about a third of the population will have no symptoms of infection, meaning that if they have had the virus, they may already have antibodies, and if they have not, they will not be ill.

All of this taken together must mean that the overall risks of death and hospitalisation are much lower than they were, and that is surely the most important consideration. Pre-vaccine, those risks clearly outweighed the risks to our mental health, our general welfare and our livelihoods that come from extensive restrictions to our liberties. However, in quantifying those risks for May or June of this year in a substantially vaccinated Britain, how different are they likely to be from the risks posed by other illnesses such as flu, or even other causes of death such as road traffic accidents, in response to which we do not seek to impose even the restrictions scheduled for the later stages of the Government's road map?

If we were considering not the continuation of restrictions today but their initiation, would we consider those restrictions justified? I am not convinced that we would. We have never run our lives or our country on the basis that no risk is acceptable. We have always balanced risks and we have to do so again here. The truth is that the risks of reopening too slowly are not negligible. Removing restrictions in June and not in May means weeks more misery for those who have found these restrictions particularly hard and for businesses, including

hospitality and tourism businesses, for which this is an important part of the year.

I do not think that we should remove all restrictions in the next 21 days and I will vote accordingly, but I do think that we should combine steps 3 and 4 of the Government's road map and remove almost all restrictions in May. An entirely precautionary approach is simply not feasible. We know that covid will be with us for some time—perhaps indefinitely—and we cannot respond to that with indefinite restrictions any more than we would, or do, in response to the risk of other diseases. Although I support much of what the Government have done and are doing in response to the pandemic, I cannot support the continuation of damaging restrictions any longer than I consider they are necessary, which I am afraid is less time than the Government propose in these regulations.

15:00:00

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab)

One year ago, the Government's Coronavirus Act was passed to address an unfolding emergency in the UK. It was an unknown situation and we understandably rushed through the extraordinary provisions without line-by-line scrutiny. But that was a year ago. Look at how much we have all now learned about viruses, mutations and vaccinations—so why are we still voting through an old bit of legislation? The Act is a blanket of draconian powers that the Government have wrapped themselves in. Last October, we were told that there was not enough time to write a new Bill, but that is simply not true now, is it? We have 21 days to write a new Bill and present it to Parliament and we will not lose anything like the furlough scheme, as has been said before. In fact, most of the measures that we have used have come under other bits of legislation.

There is no need to panic about writing a new Bill, because yesterday I presented to the House the Coronavirus (No. 2) Bill. The Prime Minister has agreed to read it and to respond to me. May I say that it is oven-ready? In fact, it is not just oven-ready; it is baked and ready to eat. It is a shame that we will not be able to discuss it today because we will not have time. The sponsors of my Bill—it is cross-party—are willing to discuss the Bill with everybody and to take amendments, because it is based on lessons learned and on the science. I sincerely thank Liberty, because without it we would not have this Bill, and it is a really good Bill. Liberty's "Support Protecting Everyone" paper is a compelling read that outlines the society that we could build as we emerge from the pandemic.

Today Parliament is voting on a piece of legislation that has failed us on so many different levels, even though Ministers have decided that they are going to get rid of some bits of it. It is not good enough; that is Parliament's job. Worryingly, through cronyism we are seeing the greatest transfer of wealth from ordinary working people and independent businesses into the hands of corporations and multi-millionaires—some old and some newly made. All this is happening at a time when the most vulnerable, those most in need of help and those most in need of support and praise, such as the NHS, have been left out in the cold. That is why I am proposing a new approach—one that is more in line with where we are now and where we are going.

Most powers that have been used to enforce coronavirus rules have their origins in

other legislation. Less than 5% are from the Coronavirus Act, so that legislation is quite literally not fit for purpose. That is why we need the Coronavirus (No. 2) Bill. It would protect disabled people and ensure proper sick pay so that people would not have to choose between spreading the virus and staying at home. It would protect those in rented accommodation. It is an efficient Bill. It has been said that nobody is safe until everybody is safe, so let us make everybody safe.

We do not have to cling to the draconian blanket of the Act just because it is there. My plea to Parliament is: let us take back control and vote against this Bill. My plea to the country is: let us stop allowing this Government to gaslight us, and let us show the Government that we care and that we want to build back better coming out of this pandemic. Parliament has a chance today, and the country will have an opportunity to take back control on 6 May when people vote Labour at the ballot box. Some 126,000 lives of loved ones have been lost due to this pandemic. If we cannot learn the lessons from this, when will we learn the lessons?

15:04:00

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con)

The habit of inhumane policy soon trickles down to the servants of the state. This morning, a constituent of mine undergoing a miscarriage was denied the company of her husband. I have sent the details to the Secretary of State.

Tyranny is a habit, and the motions on the Order Paper this evening show that we have not quite kicked it. The powers that touched our personal choices and came at such a huge cost remain. We were told that they were there purely temporarily to deal with the emergency. Well, by any measure the emergency is over and the hugely successful vaccination campaign is the guarantee against its return. Yet on the Order Paper tonight the Government seek to retain those powers to control aspects of our lives, together with the punishment regime for those who disobey.

Now, those of us who can spot the trajectory will have seen yesterday that, after months of denial, people will now indeed have to provide their vaccination bona fides when they go to the pub. Those who are teetotal and imagine that they might be spared such intrusion and inconvenience can dream on: this will undoubtedly be extended to restaurants, theatres, sporting venues, and so proceed to total social control. Did it ever occur to Ministers that they might actually incentivise vaccination—carrot, not stick? Undoubtedly it did not, because they cannot kick the habit. They are wedded to the stick.

Let there be no wringing of hands by Members of Parliament who vote for oppressive legislation and then wail with indignation when the police actually enforce it. When families are fined thousands of pounds for staying over together at Easter, we will know that it was because this House willed it so. Those people, those hon. Members, wishing for these measures to pass tonight should reflect clearly on exactly what it is they wish for.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton)

The Member who was No. 14 on the call list has withdrawn, so we go to Sir Bernard Jenkin.

15:08:00

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con)

I suppose I have an opportunity to reply to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), who has just spoken. I have a rather different take.

Many people seem to be seized of the idea that the vaccination programme has already freed us and that we are entitled to take back freedoms now. I want to challenge that. The threat of a third wave exists—in fact, there will be a third wave; it is just a question of how large it is going to be. The only thing that will constrain it is the proportion of the population who are resistant.

There is 85% take-up in half the population at the moment and the vaccines are on average 85% effective: that means that only 72% of half the population has immunity. The Secretary of State referred to Public Health England advice—based on very fresh data, I hasten to add—that bears out the most recent Imperial College modelling, which shows that even if all the restrictions are not lifted until July there is still a danger of a third wave. If the restrictions were lifted at the end of April, say, there would be a dramatic rise in the number of hospitalisations.

Mr Harper

I read with great care my hon. Friend's article on ConservativeHome this morning. He refers to the modelling that Imperial and Warwick did. I went through that in some detail, but the problem is that the assumptions they made—I went through every single one—are all overly pessimistic compared with the actuality. That is why I asked the Secretary of State to redo that modelling, because if he did so, I think he would come to a much more optimistic conclusion than my hon. Friend has reached.

Sir Bernard Jenkin

I am perfectly prepared to accept that it is a worst-case scenario, but we are dealing with projections that are based on a great deal of speculation, and they do not take account of the possibility of new variants. I rather share the concern expressed by some Members in the debate that we need restrictions on people coming into this country, particularly from the continent, and that there should be more testing of people coming here. I am sure that the Government will want to implement those measures if they can. It is rather easier to call for them to implement them than to do so without causing a great deal of disruption.

I want to briefly touch on the continuation of our vaccination programme. One of the risks that we need to factor in is that the rate of vaccination will slow, and particularly the rate of first doses, because the vaccination programme now has to cope with the large quantity of second doses. The restrictions on vaccine supply mean that the number of first doses will perhaps reduce to as little as 50,000 a week in April. That does not rule out that we should adopt a generous attitude towards our European friends, however much they may be casting around for blame and trying to salvage their reputation from the failure of their own vaccination programmes. We can draw comfort from the fact that they are resorting to possible bans and blockades because they have no contractual obligations to enforce upon AstraZeneca—it is a misunderstanding of the difference between contracts that give rights over stock that exists and contracts that give rights over the flow of production, which is creating stock that does not yet exist.

The fact is that we are at the front of the queue, but I think that the United Kingdom should seek to be generous and to avoid this vaccine nationalism, even if it means giving up some of the flow of our vaccine, although it is understood that there are actually some large quantities of vaccine in the European Union that are not being used. The fact that they have trashed the reputation of the AstraZeneca vaccine is most unfortunate, and while understandable in psychological terms, it is unforgivable in public health terms.

Finally, on the issue of lifting covid restrictions in Parliament, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, who cobbled together a majority in the Procedure Committee to get what he wanted in the Committee's report. But I suggest that, in the end, it is a matter for the whole House what the House's procedures are. There are things to learn, as the Prime Minister said yesterday, that will make the House more equal, fairer to people who are sick and fairer to people who have caring responsibilities and perhaps take the pressure off the shortage of time we have because we do not want too many late nights. Some of our debates have got too short, and speeches have got too short, and if those who had to be away could have proxy votes, we could have longer debates, better debates and better scrutiny of legislation, as well as a House that is more attractive for women to stay in and take part in.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton)

I need to point out that, if Members take interventions, it would be helpful for them to stick to the four-minute time limit, because otherwise we simply will not get everybody in. Colleagues in the Chamber may not be able to get in if Members do not stick to the time limit, which would be a shame.

15:14:00

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab) [V]

I will vote against the Act today. The Government's response has been one of the worst in the world: one of the world's highest death rates and one of the world's deepest economic downturns. Contracts that lined the pockets of political contacts were given greater priority than investing in public health measures that could have saved lives and livelihoods. Some on the Government Benches will vote against their Government today. I share nothing with their extremist views on how to respond to this health crisis. Regardless of any tactical splits in the Conservative party, the common thread between them has been an ideology that put profit before health. That is why we closed down too late. That is why we opened up too early—repeatedly.

For months, I have called on the Government to implement an alternative strategy, alongside the vaccine, to drive the virus down to very low levels, as other countries have successfully done, with a maximum suppression or zero covid strategy. This remains essential if we are to prevent dangerous mutations that render the vaccine less effective. However, any covid strategy will only be effective if there is proper economic support for those affected. Yet one year after lockdown began the Government still refuse to provide sick pay at levels that cover real living costs. It is simply unacceptable that many of the lowest-paid workers on furlough are still expected to live on less than the minimum wage. That cannot go on for months more. This is about not just social justice, but public

health. Covid deaths have been over twice as high in the most deprived communities as in the better off. Lower-paid workers are much more likely to die from covid. I am increasingly fearful that this is becoming a disease of the poor. Urgent action is needed to ensure that it does not.

People have been brilliant throughout the whole crisis, looking after each other and respecting the lockdown rules. It is the Government who have failed. While the Government continue to fail to put in place proper sick pay to those who need to self-isolate, a decent minimum income floor and other measures that deal with the deepening social crises that people in our communities face, I cannot support extending the Government's Coronavirus Act for six months. I will vote against that Act. The Government should bring back a better Act—one that protects civil liberties and tackles both the public health and social crises.

15:16:00

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con)

I welcome motion 5 in the name of the Leader of the House. It is high time that the House of Commons took back some control. I expect the House of Commons Commission to follow the lead and move in lockstep with the road map for everything else here when it comes to it.

I welcomed the road map in the House when it was published last month and I will support the regulations today, because it is a route out that I called for and it would be churlish not to. I have not changed my view that it is too cumbersome in parts—it is. I do not think it shows enough belief in vaccines, which must give us immunity from covid at the same time as giving us immunity from the restrictions on our lives—otherwise what is the point? I have not changed my view that it unfairly singles out hospitality as the villain, for instance, opening all retail and personal care businesses on 12 April—which the Prime Minister says is a date that is looking good—yet ensuring Winchester's pubs and restaurants cannot open in any truly profitable way until 17 May at the earliest. I asked the Prime Minister on 22 February why, after all the good work they did last year to create covid-secure environments, restaurants and cafés face another three months—it is still seven weeks from today—before they can open in any meaningful way. Again, I ask those on the Front Bench today, given that we are putting the road map into law, what evidence have the Government seen that has convinced them to make that decision? It is, let us remember, data, not dates.

Turning to the Coronavirus Act, I have been through the one-year report on the provisions of the Act and I thank the team for it. I note and welcome the parts that Ministers are retiring, such as section 8 on emergency volunteering leave and section 24, which gives the state crazy provision to retain the fingerprints and DNA profiles of my constituents. There are other sections—for example, section 14 allows the NHS not to comply with the requirement to continue healthcare assessments—which could be expired, given that we are nowhere near last resort territory and the NHS is clearly not at risk of being overwhelmed. There are many others. I dislike intensely schedules 21 and 22 in particular, which is very sinister, and would gladly have supported the amendment to remove it in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) had it been allowed.

Generally, however, we are in danger of conflating the regulations, the road map

out of lockdown, with the Act. They are not the same and one can happen without the other. The real action centres around the four reviews, the main three being social distancing, covid status certification and international travel, but ahead of today, I checked in with my local NHS and the two main professional bodies impacted by the emergency registration of nurses. They tell me that some provisions are still needed. I cannot deny that they said that. I checked in with the legal beagles and, given the backlog, I can see the importance of live links for criminal proceedings in our court system. So, if I am honest, I think we are rather hoist by our own petard on the renewal of the Act. Six months is way too long and it does not fit the road map, but that is what the Act says—those of us who were involved in drafting it have to take our share of responsibility for that—so it is take it or leave it territory and “leave it” would have consequences, too, even if it left behind some parts of the Act that I have said I do not like. There is no “perfect” here and I cannot, in all good sense, allow this to be a binary “good versus evil” choice of the kind so ridiculously set out, in a rare appearance, by the leader of the Liberal Democrats. It is not.

The Government should deliver on their road map, keep on retiring parts of the Act, which they can do on the two-monthly schedule, and make damn sure that we are not back here in six months’ time, because they will get a very different answer from the House of Commons.

15:20:00

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP)

I would like to associate myself with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), who made some important points, particularly about what we do and do not do to tackle the importing of variants from overseas and about the chance that it could undermine some of the efforts we are making here and the success of the vaccine programme. Unlike my hon. Friend, I have not been lucky enough yet to have my blue envelope. Sadly, I still have some time to wait—in other senses, of course, that is a positive—but I am happy to do so, in the full knowledge that the vaccine is being rolled out to those who really need it. The success on that has to be very much welcomed across the board.

For much of my time, I would like to speak about the focus that we need to have on virtual proceedings. I acknowledge the comment from the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) that the Procedure Committee recently published a report saying that its majority view was that it wants to return to normal as soon as possible, but it was a majority view—it was not unanimous—and a number of us on the Committee would like to see what can be done to consider any positives that we can take from virtual participation. I certainly welcome what the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) said about comments by the Prime Minister that that will be looked at, which back up comments previously made to the Committee by the Leader of the House.

There are positives that we can take forward from virtual participation in proceedings, and simple measures such as pass readers have benefited a lot of the work that goes on here, but it is important to highlight that there has been a distinct lack of opportunity for the House to debate a lot of these processes. Too often, it has been a “nod or nothing” motion—a take it or leave it. If we want any virtual participation at all, we have had to accept what is in the motion, and

there has not been the opportunity to debate, to amend and to consider what else would be possible.

Finally, I appreciate that no amendments are being taken today, but perhaps the Minister will take account of my Ministerial Interests (Emergency Powers) Bill. It would not put any restriction on the Government's ability to act quickly when issuing contracts relating to the pandemic. However, it would put in place a mechanism whereby, if there was a connection and there were some of the issues that have been highlighted in the press, there would be an opportunity after the event for Parliament to scrutinise, to question and to make sure that full transparency was available, so that it could have absolute confidence that those contracts had been awarded in an appropriate manner. The Bill would not slow anything down, and if the Government have nothing to fear, they have nothing to hide.

15:23:00

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con)

A year after the lockdown, may I begin by thanking people in my constituency? Of course, I thank the core workers, whom we recognise so often, in the NHS and in education, but also those on the supermarket tills, public sector transport workers and those who have been delivering to our homes and who have kept our lives going. They do not always get the mention they deserve. I also thank the community groups and volunteers who have silently and often invisibly managed to keep our communities afloat. Above all else, I thank the men, women and children in all our constituencies who have forgone the basic human pleasures of family and friends and made sacrifices to keep the rest of us safe—very unlike, I have to say, the selfish, reckless and self-indulgent individuals who were rioting close to my constituency, in Bristol, last weekend.

I would be dishonest if I did not say that I resent having to vote for a six-month extension to these rules, given that they are out of step with the lockdown path set out by the Government. However, I also accept that we have no alternative, given the legislative position in which we find ourselves, so I will support the Government today. After looking back on how we have handled this, including the legislative elements, we need to ensure that, when the same or a similar situation happens in the future, we do not allow such long periods for the Government to hold emergency powers without the House of Commons being able to regularly review them. A six-month period where the Government have such powers is out of step with our constitutional conventions in this country. It is certainly out of step with what I regard as the principles of conservatism to allow the Government that leeway, so I hope that will change.

There has been a lot of talk about the concept of passports. I will say something briefly about that. In international travel, we are all used to the concept that we cannot cross a border without having immunisation. That is a perfectly reasonable thing for any country, including the United Kingdom, to want to do. It is when it comes to domestic issues that I think there is a real problem. Were the Government to try to compel individuals to carry some proof of either immunity through vaccine or a negative test, that would be completely unacceptable in a country where civil liberties are held so highly and are so prized. However, we as Conservatives should be careful not to constrain the private sector in how it chooses its customers. If companies—whether airlines or pubs—choose to have particular customers in

particular ways, that is up to them. I would not like a Conservative Government to intervene in the freedom of the private sector to choose its customers. We cannot pick and choose which freedoms to protect and which to disapply.

On the concept of a third wave, it is not a third wave; it is a continuing wave. If a population does not have immunity to a particular pathogen, it will continue to spread until community immunity increases, either through vaccination or because of recovery from infection.

We have to ensure that we do better globally. We have not done well, as a global community, on this pandemic. We have mRNA technology, which should make it much quicker for us to deal with any emerging pathogens, yet we have a global pandemic disaster on our hands. We have to recognise that, if we are going to do better in the future, we have to have global protocols. However, we cannot have global protocols without global metrics—and we cannot even decide exactly how to measure the number of people who have died from the pandemic. We have a long way to go and, when we look at how we handled it, we need to look at how we handled it as an international community. A global pandemic requires global solutions.

15:27:00

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab)

This week marks one year since the first UK lockdown. My thoughts and prayers this week are with the loved ones of the almost 130,000 people who have lost their lives since then. It is also a year since the Government were given an unprecedented set of extraordinary powers via the Coronavirus Act. This was not done with a recorded vote. The only possible justification for giving the Government the powers outlined in the Act is to keep us safe, but this Government have presided over the worst coronavirus death toll in Europe and the worst economic recession since records began, so that clearly has not worked. Many of the measures have barely been used, as Secretary of State admitted today. Even worse, a year on, with all the experience we now have of dealing with the virus and its ramifications, Members of Parliament are not given the opportunity to scrutinise or amend measures to better serve our constituents, who continue to suffer.

It seems that, given the Act is not about safety or support, and does not even adhere to our equalities law, it is yet another means of consolidating power in an ever-failing Executive. The Secretary of State actually proved that when he announced today that the Government were suspending a number of measures in the Act. While I believe the Secretary of State thought that announcement would appease those with concerns, like me, all I heard is that, while democratically elected Members of this House can only vote yes or no, the Government can do whatever they like—no checks, no balances, no scrutiny. This Government's majority does not give them the right to run roughshod over our democracy and prevent Members from representing their constituents. I would argue that perhaps if alternative measures were permitted before the House, the Conservative party might find the numbers in its Lobby dwindling as MPs decided to vote in the best interests of their constituents. This Act is not the best we can do by this country.

Last March, when the Act was introduced, human rights organisations warned that the powers that it contained were loosely drafted, giving too much discretion to the Home Secretary and leaving too much room for confusion. The vigil in my

constituency to remember Sarah Everard shows exactly what this meant: the decision to stop women exercising their civil liberties and expressing their anger and grief actually left everyone less safe. The police should never have been in a position to do that, but they cited this Act as their legal right to do so. It has also been used to fine nurses protesting the disgraceful 1% pay rise and GMB workers picketing the disgraceful fire and rehire practices.

It is not irresponsible or unreasonable to vote against this Act today. It is, some might say, a vote against measures that are not going to keep us more safe, and it is a demand for measures that will protect us all. The first time that this Act was passed, it was done in one day. Voting this Act down would give us 21 days. We do have time. That is why I was pleased to support Liberty's "Protect Everyone Bill", the alternative coronavirus Bill –the Coronavirus (No. 2) Bill–presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler). There is an alternative, and I will vote against the renewal of this Act tonight to give us the opportunity to realise that.

15:31:00

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con)

I refer to the declarations that I have made relating to support for the Covid Recovery Group. There are people out there who are absolutely furious because of the great harms and losses that they have suffered. My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) mentioned his pint of milk protest, which has already attracted the interest of sketch writers. He reminded me that I have learned recently from the National Farmers Union that in our area, south Bucks and Middlesex, three dairy herds have been lost because the closure of hospitality has reduced the supply for their products—three dairy herds lost, with all the livelihoods that go with them and all the wellbeing effects on the farms.

I remember and wish to honour the 302 people who have died in Wycombe district—a district a little larger than my constituency. Of course, we need to remember with humility that people have died from this disease, but we also need to look to the future and remember the harms caused by the response to coronavirus: wellbeing and economic harms from lockdowns and restrictions. We need to be very careful to categorise the causes of those harms very carefully.

According to the "Guido Fawkes" website today:

"Polling by Yonder for the Recovery campaign reveals that the Government's pandemic advertising has had a shocking impact on the mental health of the nation. Over 15% of respondents reported depression, anxiety, or fear as a direct result of Government pandemic advertising. That's equivalent to over 8 million people."

I know that every Minister and every Member of this House wishes to improve the mental health of the nation, but I am afraid the indications are that one of the best ways we could improve the nation's mental health right now would be to cease this terrifying advertising and say to the public, "There is great news. The vaccines are working." We should stop terrifying people, treat them like adults and ask them to comply, but to comply while we get the vaccine rolled out and save lives.

I turn to the steps regulations. The reality is that these proposals will pass tonight. I think the House has already heard an excellent case for voting against. I have paid great attention to my great friend Dr Raghieb Ali, an epidemiologist and acute medicine consultant in my constituency, who has written on "ConservativeHome" saying why we should unite around these steps regulations. There are proposals in there that I would not be willing to vote for, but I very much hope that, today, the House will choose not to divide over these regulations. They are a path to freedom and, my goodness, we do need one. But I say to the Government, please look at the work of Professor Paul Dolan at the London School of Economics. He and I have spoken about something called situational blindness. However well-intentioned and skilful the professionals are who have formed these policies, I fear that they are rather like all of us—in secure employment, in decent housing, perhaps with gardens and a view. Many, many other people out there affected by these rules are not, have not been and will not be.

There is a great deal more to be said. Schedule 21 of the Coronavirus Act has the 100% record of failure that has been well articulated. I regret that my amendment could not be selected. I would hope that everyone who has spoken against schedule 21 would have voted for it, and I think it would have gone through. I will, unfortunately, have to vote against the Government tonight in order to protest schedule 21, and also schedule 22, which has never been used and is therefore redundant. Those schedules should certainly be removed.

The Act is extreme, unnecessary and disproportionate—I do not have time to go through why—and for that reason I shall vote against it. It is absolutely imperative, as we go forward, that we get the House of Commons back in line with the steps programme, but the one thing we must not do is exempt ourselves from the inconvenience suffered by the public.

15:35:00

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab)

If there is a vote tonight, I shall vote no because of concerns that the Government are still focusing on risk avoidance rather than risk management when the public want to get back to normality and thought they were going to be getting that with the vaccine roll-out. In fact, as I see it, this is a move away from earlier on in the pandemic when there seemed to be a balance of debate inside Government between the economic tendency—the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Business Department—and the Health Department. That is a healthy tension because there are real decisions that have to be made. But it now seems almost as though the Chancellor of the Exchequer has become invisible and vanished from that debate, and there is only one group inside Government who are now driving it.

I would have preferred these measures to have monthly renewals by Parliament so that they could be considered much more regularly, because the cost to the economy and to the physical and mental health of our nation has been enormous and is frankly unsustainable. Many parts of the economy, especially in the leisure, hospitality and entertainment industries, are teetering on the brink. Every week more of them go under. Hundreds of thousands of our fellow citizens are being put on the dole and many more are fearful that they face the same fate. This is particularly impacting on young people who are not able to get into the labour market. Many small family businesses, with their hopes, fears and aspirations, are

being ruined. Millions of self-employed, as we have heard regularly in this House, have been left high and dry.

As we have also heard today, long supply chains of industries are being hit. Many of these industries are part of our attraction to the wider world and they all need Britain to get back to work—the pubs and clubs, restaurants and cafés, theatres and cinemas, TV and film production companies, sporting venues, sports clubs, betting shops, bingo halls and casinos. They are part of what makes our society, what makes Britain an attractive place to live and work, and why people come here, and many of them are being hit incredibly badly.

The public want to be back to normal. As the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) rightly said, they got the vaccines thinking that that would be a pathway back to normality. That is why, unlike some, I believe that vaccine passports or certificates may be inevitable, not only for foreign travel but here as well. I heard Jonathan Neame on the radio this morning. He is a man who knows the beer business extremely well, but he was not necessarily facing up to the real alternative, which is that if the Government drag their feet on reopening, vaccine passports that enable businesses to open earlier, stay open and keep the whole supply chain going may be something that we have to seriously consider.

There has been quite a bit of discussion about variants, as mentioned by both the Health Secretary and the shadow Health Secretary. I think it is now generally accepted that coronavirus will be a bit like flu with regular recurrences, probably towards autumn and winter. I worry that we are going down the path of the EU precautionary principle rather than managing that risk and accepting that unless we are going to keep shutting down society, we will have to work out how to deal with it. As I have said during the course of this pandemic, we need a policy that enables us to co-exist with the virus rather than vainly hoping we can eliminate it. That is the real challenge, and the question is: can the Government rise to it?

15:39:00

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con)

I think in our constituencies there is a real fear that the road map and the extension of the Coronavirus Act are one and the same, that extending the latter means effectively delaying the former, and that if we support the motion this evening, lockdown restrictions will be extended and freedoms not returned. I therefore echo the concerns of some of my right hon. and hon. Friends, such as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) and my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), about today's motions. They are not all ideal, because many of us would prefer the return of full freedoms to coincide with the end of the Coronavirus Act, and the Health Secretary made the case as to why that could not be so, while ending some 12 schedules of the restrictions within the Act. He made the case for the need for the Act continue.

If we could amend the Act, I would agree with several colleagues that, for example, schedule 14, for health assessments, and schedule 1, which gives powers to the police to detain those potentially infectious persons for up to 24 hours, would be prime candidates. In fact, as my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), pointed out, schedule 22 has never been used at all, and that would be another candidate for amendment. But we have allowed legislation that is not

amendable, and therefore the choice this evening is really whether to support the motions, because there are parts of the Act that have been widely useful, such as temporary courts, the different treatment of leases, and statutory sick pay, and those do, I believe, require support from us all.

John Spellar

The reality is that if the Government were defeated tonight, they would recall Parliament and put through the legislation to pass the necessary measures, and therefore they are erecting a false alternative, are they not?

Richard Graham

If the right hon. Gentleman will allow me, I want to focus this evening on the key messages that I think it is important for us to hear from the Government this evening; when the Minister sums up, perhaps he can allude to them. The first is that we are still trading on a slogan of "Protect the NHS". Although none of us underestimates the importance of a fully functioning NHS or the incredible efforts made by all our local NHS trusts, the time has come to recognise that actually in many of our hospitals there are now fewer people with coronavirus than would normally be there with flu; that the huge efforts made by our NHS have broadly succeeded in taking out of hospital—certainly in my hospital, the Gloucestershire Royal Hospital—those patients who had been in intensive treatment; and that the time has come to look at the huge backlog of other physical operations that are needed, at the people who have been too shy to come forward because they were frightened of catching the virus just by going into hospital, and at the incredible backlog of mental health issues that is only just beginning to surface.

Last weekend, the father of a young woman currently working for me dived into the River Severn fully clad in order to save a young woman from drowning. She did not want to be saved; she wanted to commit suicide. We are, in each of our constituencies, seeing more cases of that type, and each one has a whole ricochet of tragedy attached to it, as the Minister knows well.

Therefore, whatever the new message is—I shall not try to draft it for the Government this evening—I think the message has to be that it is now time for us all, but inevitably particularly the NHS, to look after those who have not had coronavirus; to swivel our attention, not completely away from the pandemic, which has not gone away and will never completely go away; and to recognise how much more needs to be done to protect others in society and give them the chances and the attention to flourish—which, of course, is where the road map comes in. I still believe that it is an almost impossible task for our police forces to fully implement the requirements of the restrictions that we have laid on them, and I hope that the Government will be able to do more to allow things to open a little bit earlier and give back those freedoms that everybody values so dearly.

15:44:00

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD)

We could scarcely have imagined that, a whole year after a strange virus that we knew very little about arrived on our shores and Ministers were able to railroad a 348-page Bill through Parliament in three days, taking away individuals' rights and freedoms on an unprecedented scale, we would be here being asked to renew those powers yet further still. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and

Surbiton (Ed Davey) made very clear, the Liberal Democrats will not and cannot support the renewal of the Coronavirus Act today. We will absolutely not give a blank cheque to Ministers to continue those draconian powers.

I turn my attention to the road map regulations. In the main, I welcome the fact that the Government have finally learned the hard way, after three lockdowns, 126,000 deaths, of which 84,000 were in the past six months alone, and untold damage to people's lives and livelihoods, that "steady as she goes", as opposed to what happened last summer, is the key to unlocking safely. However, as the right hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) has already pointed out, vaccination alone will not keep the virus under control as we open up, especially given the third wave that we are seeing surging in so many European countries. That is a huge threat to us, so tough public health measures at our borders are critical, yet the travel ban in the regulations is simply not fit for purpose.

I am appalled that Ministers wish to criminalise people for visiting loved ones overseas, yet the Prime Minister's father and friends get a free pass to go and take care of their second homes abroad—because of course second home owners cannot possibly bring the virus back into this country, can they? Despite clear scientific advice and international best practice in support of a blanket quarantine for arrivals from all countries, our system was implemented far too late and is far too leaky to properly protect against new variants being imported that could potentially be vaccine resistant. Criminalising international travel with a £5,000 fine and an exemption for second home owners exemplifies the Government's approach to so many aspects of the pandemic: half-baked, authoritarian, and one rule for them and one rule for us.

Alongside vaccination and tougher restrictions at our borders as we embark on this road map out of lockdown, with virus rates inevitably jumping again, breaking chains of transmission will be critical, as the Health Secretary himself said earlier, yet the regulations do nothing to improve the rate of self-isolation. With as many as 20,000 people a day not self-isolating, when will Ministers realise that paying people to stay at home, and providing practical support for those with dependants and accommodation for those in overcrowded homes, is key to boosting self-isolation?

Robust quarantine measures at our borders and far better self-isolation must go hand in hand with vaccination in order gradually and safely to open up our economy and society. Neither the far-reaching, draconian powers in the Coronavirus Act, nor vaccine passports for domestic use, which would create a two-tier society and an extra burden for struggling businesses, will achieve that aim. Our constituents have sacrificed far too much, and our scientists, NHS staff and volunteers have achieved wonders through the vaccine programme, so I implore Ministers: let us not squander these gains.

15:47:00

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con)

Let me deal with the two fundamental choices that we face today. The first is on the Government's regulations implementing the road map that the Prime Minister set out. I am not going to vote against those. I am not going to support them, but I am not going to vote against them; it would be churlish. They are a road map to

freedom, and my only quarrel is with the pace, not with the direction of travel.

I go back to what the Secretary of State said. He was very clear that the Government will not be looking at modelling; they are looking at real data. If we look at hospitalisation data, the dramatic reduction in the number of deaths and the fantastic pace of the vaccination roll-out—we have seen data today showing how fantastic the take-up of vaccination has been—it is clear that we are going to be able to save lives and protect the NHS not by staying at home but by the vaccination doing the heavy lifting.

I want to pick up a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) made about the quantity of the population that has been protected. It is absolutely true that we will not have vaccinated everyone by the end of April, but importantly, we will of course have vaccinated groups 1 to 9, which account for 99% of the deaths to date and over 80% of the hospitalisations. While we will not have stopped everyone getting covid, we will have dealt with the problem of significant numbers of people becoming seriously ill, going into hospital and potentially overwhelming the NHS, and large numbers of people dying. That is why I maintain—and, increasingly, the data will bear this out—that we could safely reopen society more quickly than the 21 June deadline. The reason why that is important is that there is another side to this situation: in that time, jobs will be lost, businesses will fail and some people will find the personal burden incredibly difficult to bear. We do not need to go through that for another two months if we are able to reopen safely earlier.

On the Coronavirus Act and the renewal of the temporary measures, I am very pleased that the Secretary of State confirmed at the Dispatch Box that what we have been hearing about the furlough scheme being brought to an end if we voted against the temporary provisions is nonsense. I said that at the weekend and I am glad that the Secretary State has now confirmed it at the Dispatch Box. I accept that there is a choice, but the problem is that some measures the Government want to take forward are very sensible, and I support them, while many others are egregious and absolutely not supported. Given that we have an up or down vote and no ability to amend, we have to balance these things. I will vote against the renewal of the temporary provisions, because the measures that the Government want to take forward are sufficiently bad and unwarranted that they do not deserve to continue. If the Government were to lose that vote—they are not going to lose it—they could, given their majority, easily implement the more sensible measures that are necessary in an alternative piece of legislation that would no doubt get through this House with cross-party and, I think, almost universal support.

Finally, I wish to reflect on what the Secretary of State said. I raised with him the point that was in the one-year review of the Act, which suggests that the schedule 21 powers—the ones that give the police the power to detain people—are necessary for the long term, and he did not rule out extending those measures for another six months. By the Government's own admission in their explanatory notes, these measures are extraordinary and would not be acceptable in normal circumstances. Given that the Prime Minister wants us to have removed restrictions by June, it is not acceptable to extend those measures to October and I certainly do not think it necessary to extend them to March. That is why, regretfully, I will be voting against the renewal of the temporary provisions.

15:51:00

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab) [V]

I am pleased that some provisions are being removed from the Coronavirus Act. It is important to note that, although no amendments were selected for debate, the Opposition rightly pointed out that the Government's handling of the pandemic has resulted in one of the highest death tolls in the world and the worst economic crisis of any major economy, and they have allowed the pandemic to exacerbate the inequalities in our society and to impact black, Asian and minority ethnic communities and disabled people disproportionately.

The public health restrictions have been essential to protect our most vulnerable, but the Government have damaged public trust by failing to publish and communicate effectively the data behind key decisions. The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, of which I am a member, concluded in our recent report that the Government's communication

“has not always been transparent enough.”

It said that the lack of transparency in relation to the local lockdown and tiering decisions led to “confusion and mistrust”.

I have heard at first hand from businesses in Luton South, especially from the hospitality sector, the frustration that they felt at not being able to access the information and data that the Government used to inform the decisions that stopped or interrupted their operations. The failure to communicate the 10 pm curfew and the restrictions on wet-led pubs caused particular distress and anger. Businesses could not understand why the Government did not work with them. Publicans told me that they already ran licensed, controlled premises and had already introduced additional coronavirus health and safety measures to keep staff and customers safe.

Businesses need to be able to plan effectively. While the Government are giving confirmation that certain restrictions will be relaxed no earlier than a specific date, that is not sufficient assurance for businesses without having sight of underlying information, and any trends and thresholds to be met. Hospitality businesses need this information to help plan for full reopening, which can take around two or three weeks, if not more, if they need to order supplies and fresh stock and to ensure that they have sufficient staff.

Building trust with the hospitality sector is vital and the Government must improve on the approach taken over the past year. As the PACAC report put it:

“Transparency builds trust, and trust aids compliance with rules.”

Alongside the new road map regulations, I press the Secretary of State to learn from past mistakes and urgently to publish detailed information and data that underpin each step in the relaxation of restrictions.

15:54:00

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con)

Let me start by congratulating the Government on the remarkable success of the

vaccination programme. It has been phenomenal and it has made many, many people feel incredibly safe, me included—I have only four weeks until my second jab, and. I cannot wait to get it, as I will feel even better. It has given reassurance to the elderly, the disabled and those people who have felt trapped in their homes for so many months—some did not even take advantage of going out much last summer. The Government have done a fantastic job with the vaccination programme.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), I want to congratulate those people who have worked day in, day out, without much thanks, to keep the country moving. I refer to the people in the public health system and, in particular, the people in the supermarkets, who have had all sorts of people coming in and standing pretty close to them, without knowing whether covid was being passed on or not.

There have been some remarkable successes in this pandemic, but there have been some errors. My view is that we have been moving the goalposts—they started at Wembley and they are now nearly at Derby County! I am extremely worried that if we are not careful, they will be up in Scotland. We thought the vaccine was going to be the thing that would save us, and it is going to save us. We are not where we were a year ago. We are much safer than we were then. People feel safer, but we seem to be thinking that still we cannot open hospitality businesses and weddings cannot go ahead in any sort of normal circumstance. That has such a huge impact on the rest of society—it is about the supply chains and all those single-people businesses that have had no help and no earnings for a year. We need to get those people back to work so that they can earn and get back on their feet.

We have to remember that this is not just about the pandemic; it is about the all-round health of the nation. We heard tragically from my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) about suicides. There was one down the lane from us, which I did not even know about. It is tragic that there are so many suicides because people cannot face being trapped in their homes any more and they are frightened to go out. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) about stopping all these terrifying views through adverts and things in the paper. We need to say that we are doing well and will continue to do well—Europe permitting—to get the vaccines in. But we must move forward; we must let people out. Those hospitality businesses and wedding venues have spent hundreds of thousands of pounds protecting their businesses, but they are not allowed to open. The wedding industry—I wonder whether it is because the businesses are mainly run by women—has been left with contradictory messages, and I feel the Government could be much clearer about how weddings can operate and how quickly. It is Easter and love should be in the air, but it is not.

15:58:00

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD) [V]

As my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) said a moment ago, Liberal Democrats will not support the proposals on the table today. We consider the request for extended powers for the period of time to be an overreach—these are powers the Government do not need, and certainly do not need for a period of six months, taking us right into the autumn.

My great concern is that the Government's default, knee-jerk attempt to seek these

draconian powers for a lengthier period is beginning to fit into a pattern. We saw the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill in this place just a week or so ago, under which the Government are seeking powers to incarcerate people for up to 10 years if they protest against the Government. We are also seeing reports of the Government wanting to force carers to be vaccinated, when they have done so by choice already. That shows a complete lack of respect and tenderness towards people who have put their lives on the line for this past 12 months and longer to support others in their deepest moment of need. Of course we now have pub landlords being asked to be, in effect, border guards in their own pubs and to check a vaccine passport.

All this seems to indicate that we have a Conservative party in government that loves talking about liberty until it has to do something about it in practice, and when it comes to dealing with these issues in practice, its instincts are authoritarian. As always, if you care about liberty, you need your Liberals—and so the Liberals are guaranteed to be voting against this draconian set of powers on the table today. It is also worth bearing in mind that I do not think the police are crying out for additional extensions to their powers. What they want is two things: resources and clarity in the guidelines and laws that they do seek to enforce.

Throughout this pandemic the strictness of the laws has not been the issue; it has been the clarity of the guidance. The Government have very often been contradicting themselves, mixing messages and sending out the wrong messages, as well as not keeping the guidance themselves as individuals and therefore setting a terrifyingly awful lead.

I want to make just one suggestion. On the road map out of this difficult time that clearly we are all experiencing as a national community, outdoor education has no place whatever. We know when nightclubs are going to open, but outdoor education facilities in my constituency in the lakes and dales, and across the rest of the country, have no date for reopening. The Government are killing off a vital industry that is there to support our young people. Its skills are especially needed at a time like this, when we want to reconnect young people with a love of learning.

The lack of a date and of bespoke funding is killing off outdoor education. My friend Kirsty Williams, the Minister for Education in Wales, announced just the other day a particular package for outdoor education centres in Wales. There is a package in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Why is there not a bespoke package for outdoor education centres in England today? Today is surely the day for them to do just that.

It is also worth bearing in mind that as people become able to move in significant numbers, as of next Monday, to beautiful places such as the Lake District, we need—and have needed for some months now—investment in popularising the countryside code. That is so that people know how to behave in beautiful places, how to treat the local residents with respect and how to look after the environment that they have come to enjoy. I am pleased that the Government are, as of the Easter weekend, putting resources into the countryside code. They should have done it nine months ago when we asked them to.

My final point is about hospitality and tourism businesses beginning to reopen. They will not all be able to open at capacity when they are allowed to. That is why financial support for them must continue until the autumn.

16:02:00

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con)

I open up by wishing everyone well on what has been a rather unhappy first anniversary of covid lockdowns and the passing of the Coronavirus Act. I do not think it has been a very happy time for anyone around the country.

The incredible success of the vaccination programme—whether it is the technicians, engineers and scientists or the roll-out itself—has been much more of a positive and its effectiveness has been startling. I do not think that a year ago anyone would have expected to be at this stage. The United Kingdom is leading Europe and the world in vaccine delivery.

The Secretary of State ought to be proud of that success. He has spoken of that sense of breaking the link between transmission, hospitalisation and death. That link is fracturing in a very significant way. At the moment, we are pretty much able to say that that link has broken. At the end of this month—certainly next month—that link between transmission, death and hospitalisation will have gone.

I welcome the fact that we are now seeking to retire certain temporary provisions. Some were never needed and some were needed only for a temporary period and are no longer needed. But I am concerned that the Government are seeking to retain schedule 21, the provision for controlling people, given that there has been a 100% failure rate for prosecutions. I am also concerned that schedule 22, for controlling gatherings, is also being retained. That has not even been used over the past year, and we have been through the worst parts of the lockdown. It has not been as bad as some of the projections have suggested, but it has been a pretty bad time for a great many people, so why are we seeking to retain schedule 22, which was never needed during the worst of times?

I am also concerned by the increasing political narrative conveyed through the media of compulsion in vaccination, including with children being vaccinated—children who suffer so little, if at all, from the virus itself. We are going on now about vaccine passports, and the covid status certificate is a very concerning issue. I think that is being increasingly raised, and it seems to be inevitable. I just wonder about the European football championships, which will be held later this year, and whether the Prime Minister's offer to hold them in the United Kingdom will be used to showcase how effective such certificates can be. Is that the reason that schedule 22 has been retained—for the control of people at those sorts of events? Will it be restricted just to those events, or could it be widened out further to pubs and restaurants, public transport, places of work or places of education?

I am not sure these concerns have been decisively ruled out, and I do think that the debate should be had. It would be welcome if my hon. Friend the Minister explained the retention of schedule 22; we have been going through this for a year now, and we must know exactly why it is being retained.

16:06:00

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD)

It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green), who posited many of the absolutely central questions in this debate.

I readily confess that I find this a slightly frustrating experience, and it does come to the heart of the House's role in scrutinising legislation. Many of the issues that are central to this legislation are about the definition of the relationship between the citizen and state. To try to deal with these matters in a four-minute time limit is a level of ambition to which not even I—notwithstanding the fact that I am a Liberal Democrat—am able to aspire.

It is worth recalling that, when we enacted this legislation last year, we were trying to imagine what the future would look like. We did not know what would be the course of the pandemic or how this place would work, so we were right to be cautious and we were right to trust the Government with our freedoms, but a year on we know an awful lot more than we did then.

As the hon. Member for Bolton West has said, it is surely apparent that many of the powers we gave to the Government in the Bill last year were not needed or have not been used, and some of them have not even been enacted. As he said, 252 people have been charged with criminal offences under this Act, with not one single prosecution as a consequence. That and that alone should surely be ringing alarm bells on the Treasury Bench about the advisability of continuing with this.

Of course, it will always be the case that when we give a Government a power, they will want to hold on to it. We can go back to 1939, when this House said it was okay to have an identity card scheme. Did the Government stop the identity card scheme in 1945? No, they did not. They held on to it, and it took a private citizen to raise a court case in 1952 before we saw the back of the identity card scheme.

Mention of identity cards brings me to vaccine passports and the idea, today, of some sort of certification of people's vaccine status that will allow them to get a pint in a pub when pubs reopen—or a measure of whisky if that is their preference. I have to say that this idea of vaccine passports is a dangerous one. It is the very thin end of a thick and illiberal wedge that we approach with caution. It raises all sorts of questions. If it is okay to force people to carry a piece of paper or a card to confirm their health status in relation to this particular virus, once we have conceded that principle, where does it take us? Is it then going to be okay for people to carry a piece of paper, under some future Government, that says they are HIV-negative, or whatever it is?

Mr Steve Baker

I am no stranger to the right hon. Member. I am confident that it will be even worse than he imagines. It is bound to be an app on our phones with face ID that leaves behind an enormous swathe of data everywhere we go.

Mr Carmichael

Indeed. I do not think the hon. Gentleman was in the House in 2006, when Labour tried to introduce identity cards, but I remember the objections, which were forcefully put by the then Opposition—the Conservative party—regarding the need for

a register, or a database of its use. That is exactly where a vaccine passport scheme would take us back to.

I do not know whether many on the Treasury Bench have ever worked in a bar for a living. I did it for five years, before I went to university to do my law degree. If those on the Treasury Bench think that the best way to bring us in this country to a place where we become the sort of “papers please” society that we have always resisted in the past, is by doing that through pubs, I warn them that they are sadly—or perhaps happily—mistaken. Such a situation would put those who work in our pubs in the most unpleasant and difficult situation, and inevitably lead to complacency. It all would mean that instead of continuing to focus on masking, social distancing and the rest of it—those measures will be necessary to avoid a spike in infections, if and when we reopen licenced establishments and elsewhere—we will inevitably end up with a spike in infections.

For all sorts of reasons, both practical and due to matters of high principle, the Government are currently going in the wrong direction. If the House gives them carte blanche and offers them a black cheque to go in that direction, by renewing the provisions of the Coronavirus Act 2020, we will not be doing the job that our voters sent us here to do.

16:11:00

Sir Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con)

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, and delighted to follow the wise words of the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). I am the 31st Member to speak in this debate. I have been here throughout, and I think I am right in saying that only two Members have given their unqualified support to what the Government propose. The Government would be wise to reflect on that, considering the gap that is opening up between our rulers—the Executive and the Government—and those of us who represent the liberties of the British people. I am particularly pleased to be the fourth Greater Manchester Member to speak against what is being proposed, because we come from a city with a fine and long history of standing up for liberty, and I am glad that is continuing.

The danger in what is being proposed is that we risk normalising an extreme policy response. It was put in place during the emergency a year ago with very little thought or debate, and draconian powers were given to the Government, who initially expected a three-week lockdown, which then became a three-month lockdown. My constituents, like those of my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green), were released for three weeks, and then they were again put under heavy new restrictions.

I have asked before in this Chamber a question about whose rights we are dealing with. Do the Government have the right to tell people whether they can see their children or grandchildren, or whether they can start a relationship with someone? My answer is an emphatic “no”. Even those who are less certain should reflect on whether extreme control over people’s right to family life, intimate relationships, and freedom of association should be introduced just briefly by the Government in an emergency, or for more than a year.

On 6 January—the last time we had an opportunity to assert some control on the

Government exercising these powers—the Prime Minister told me, when I intervened on him, that it would be very surprising if the House did not get a vote to get rid of any of these restrictions before the end of March. Well, okay, it is 25 March, so perhaps we should prepare to be surprised. I stand with Members in all parts of the House who have said we should expect that, if the Government are given these extreme powers and allowed them for longer, they will retain them and are likely to seek to extend them. That is why the House should say no to extending the Coronavirus Act—it would have been in force for a year and a half at least.

The danger is that Government start to believe that these fundamental civil liberties belong to Ministers to grant to us or withhold. They do not—they belong, as of right, to British citizens. It is this habit of control that leads to coercive laws that have no sense. Government have, for example, a legitimate interest in people who entered the United Kingdom from high-risk countries, but there is no public health argument for fining people £5,000 for leaving the country, and the Government should think again about that. This habit of coercion and control has gone too far, and it has gone on for too long. It is time for this House to trust the British people and return their rights to them.

16:15:00

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con)

It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady). I thank him for his leadership in the campaign that so many of us support, trying to ensure that some common sense and proportionality are brought to this debate and that we have our freedoms back, because we should not have them taken away from us unless there is the most compelling justification.

As my hon. Friend said, this is also an issue of trust. The Government are using the slogan “data not dates”, but the data is either being withheld or ignored. I have been regularly looking at the so-called coronavirus dashboard. Suddenly, when the data got rather good from my perspective but bad from the Government’s perspective, it disappeared. The latest data on the dashboard for hospital admissions in Dorset goes back to 11 March, so I had to make my own inquiries, and I found out that within the last week, there have only been three hospital admissions in all the hospitals throughout Dorset. We have 1,200 beds in our hospitals, and we have a population of over three quarters of a million people. That data does not tell me that it is reasonable that we should continue to have a lockdown and that people should be deprived of their social and economic liberty. One of my constituents who is very good on these things wrote to me saying that 5,000 cases from 1.9 million tests shows that 99.993% of the population were unaffected. That is what we are talking about in terms of proportionality.

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Steps) (England) Regulations 2021 extend to 94 pages. How do the Government believe that we can support the regulations when there is not even an impact assessment for them? If there was an impact assessment, it would point out that every day those regulations remain in place is costing the economy about £1 billion—£1 billion a day. We can get a lot of for £1 billion, and if a cost of £1 billion a day is being incurred, there certainly needs to be a lot more justification than the Government have so far adduced during this debate.

I expect that people will increasingly take the law into their own hands as they see that there is no risk in going out and meeting in the open, as was confirmed in evidence to the Science and Technology Committee, and that there are very few risks associated with social mixing with people who are already vaccinated. The Government have got it completely wrong on risk assessment. My advice to the Minister would be to go and get some risk assessment therapy during the Easter break and then come back with some new ideas in April. He should reflect on the adage that the welfare of humanity is always the alibi of tyrants. That, in essence, is what this debate is about, and that is why I shall be voting against these measures.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans)

After Greg Clark's four-minute contribution, there are seven Members left to speak. To get everybody in, we will reduce the time limit to three minutes, and the winding-up speeches will start no later than 4.44 pm.

16:19:00

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con)

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) mentioned the evidence to the Science and Technology Committee that there is no known instance of outdoor infection from covid. That comes from a session that we held to scrutinise the science behind the road map measures, and I thought in my few minutes today I might just draw the House's attention to some more of the evidence we took.

First, the road map was set based on an assessment based on evidence that is more than six weeks old. It did not have the advantage that we now have of the experience of what has happened since the vaccination programme returned results. What we know, very happily, is that the assumptions made were much more pessimistic on vaccine take-up and vaccine effectiveness than have come to be realised.

My hon. Friend will know that witnesses to our Committee suggested strongly that if we are to be driven by data not dates, we should have the flexibility to advance more quickly, should that be possible. We know that there is not the opportunity today to revise those dates, so we have what we have, but I hope that the Minister will take from this debate the real determination that we should stick at least to those dates and be rigorous in looking at the data, all of which is encouraging.

I have some concerns, as did witnesses to the Committee, about what might happen in the future. A fellow member of the Committee, the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer), talked about the opacity of some of the data that is there to trigger further releases. The road map is in place, but the powers of the 2020 Act will continue, and I was a little concerned to hear the Secretary of State in his opening speech, having noted the 90% fall in hospital admissions from the peak of the pandemic, then use words of great caution about continuing to need to protect the NHS. Of course we need to do that, but we need to know what that means.

In evidence to the Committee, both Chris Whitty and Dame Angela McLean begged this House—politicians and Ministers—for some indication of what we regard as a tolerable level of risk. In the case of flu, which they cited, we have deaths each year, but in seeking to avoid them we do not lock down the whole country, so we need to supply an assessment of what degree of proportionality we should take. I do

not say that should boil down to a number, as we do not do that with flu; we should nevertheless come to an understanding of what are appropriate measures in the context of the disease.

Finally, it is important to reflect on the evidence that we heard that we will not be entirely able to keep out infections and new variants from overseas, short of doing such damage to our society and our economy as is unconscionable for a trading nation as well connected as we are. I hope therefore that the Minister will confirm that we are not going to pursue a policy of repelling boarders, which would be ruinous for our economic future and our reputation as an open trading nation.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans)
Three-minute limit.

16:23:00

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con) [V]

This pandemic has put a great strain on our society and our economy, but it has also shown the strong social cohesion in the country. People have worked together and co-operated with what the science has suggested will beat this virus. As a Conservative, I do not like to see restrictions on our freedoms any more than other hon. Members, but the measures we have put in place to combat this fast-moving novel virus have saved lives. Let us compare the Spanish flu epidemic after world war one with this one. The response to the former was driven by ineffective measures to prevent transmission and incomplete responses when it was clear that it was a fast-spreading pandemic. Spanish flu killed 50 million people worldwide and at least a quarter of a million in the UK—double the number of those who have died so far from covid.

We said we needed restrictions last year to protect our NHS and to allow it to function, and they have worked and saved lives. Of course we sympathise with everyone who has lost a friend or relative, or is suffering from the effects of long covid, but it must be clear that the situation would be much worse had we not had the restrictions. Because we have contained the virus more, we can now move along the road map, and I welcome the revocation of the all-tiers regulations with the new framework. That will allow us to reduce the levels of restriction at each stage.

I quite understand the concerns of constituents who want us to move on from lockdowns and get back on track, but we do need this framework to avoid a free-for-all at a time when we still have to vaccinate such large numbers of adults. We must keep our guard up against potential new variants and the emerging new wave in the EU and elsewhere. New mutations can develop when a virus is able to spread through unprotected populations.

My support for these regulations was reinforced yesterday at a meeting of the Hampshire local resilience forum. We heard from Dr Nigel Watson, a retired GP, who, like many others, has come back to help the NHS. He would like to continue to help with the backlog of medical cases over the next few months. Extending the regulations will allow him and others to do this. The help of Dr Watson and others is an extremely important part of getting the NHS back to normality, so I am pleased that we are extending section 2 of the Act to ensure this can continue. His

story is typical of that of so many people who have helped our national effort to eliminate this dreadful disease, so let me finish by thanking him and everyone else in the NHS and the public sector who have worked so hard to support society so that we can now move on again. I will be supporting the extension of these regulations.

16:26:00

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con) [V]

It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond).

I will start with some positives. The success of the vaccination programme is a fantastic achievement; Katie Bingham is a national hero. The Secretary of State has also worked tirelessly, as have many other Ministers. I thank again everyone involved with the vaccination process on the Isle of Wight, including the NHS teams in primary care and secondary care.

However, I am not happy with the Government's plans today and I think they are unbalanced. In the next couple of minutes, I will explain why. First—this has been echoed by others—the Government have said that they will base their response on data, not dates, but it has become clear that the data has changed quicker than predicted and the dates have not changed. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) just said, Government action is now based on data that is old and negative—too old and too negative. I have yet to hear a credible explanation as to why. Where is the new updated data that we should be using if we have fresh, new data? I fear that, yet again, science is being used gently to lead the debate, rather than to frame it with the evidence necessary for us to make decisions.

Secondly, basing lockdown on cases, not deaths, is not good enough. I was listening to Professor Van-Tam briefing Members a couple of days ago. He is clearly a very impressive man, but his presentation was clear: lockdown was being justified on cases. But cases are not deaths or hospitalisations. I felt as though I was almost being misled, and I say that with great respect to him. He was saying that we have to continue this way because we have cases, despite the Government saying that we cannot eliminate covid from our society and we have to live with it. We have been under house arrest for nearly a year now. Justifying continued mass house arrest based on cases, not deaths or hospitalisations, frankly felt like very thin gruel from the Government.

Thanks to the miracle of vaccination—and it is a scientific miracle, as this is the first time in human history that a pandemic is being defeated with science, which is an extraordinary event in the history of humanity—the link between cases, hospitalisation and death has been broken. Yes, we need to be mindful of cases, but cases are not deaths. The continuation of these draconian measures, now based on a “not quite sure” approach, is not normal. As my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) said, we should not be normalising this response, because our liberties belong to us, not to the Government. Continuing in this way now, when we have broken the link between death, hospitalisation and cases sets a dangerous precedent.

16:29:00

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con) [V]

I think the day when all the regulations under the Coronavirus Act are lifted will be my highlight in this Parliament. That is a day that cannot come soon enough, but I do accept that today is not that day.

There is a road map and an end in sight, but the events on the continent remind us that we have not reached the end point just yet. Were the measures lifted today, many that have been deemed necessary to curtail the spread of disease and some of the measures that are helpful, such as statutory sick pay, would be removed. Given how far we have come, it is necessary to lift measures gradually to ensure that this is a one-way process, rather than taking too many steps forward now, only to have to revert at a later stage. The vaccination programme is our route out of lockdown and about 30 million jabs done is a fantastic success. I worry that sudden change might undo a lot of that good work.

The road map as it stands will see most restrictions lifted by June, and this House is being asked to renew measures for six months. I understand that that will effectively mean that large parts of the Act will be dormant, but that they can be reactivated if necessary, without primary legislation. I do not support coronavirus legislation with enthusiasm, but I understand its necessity. That is why I will be supporting the Government today.

While covid and the restrictions are on the decline, there is talk of living in a covid-tinged world for some time to come. There is a broader question. If one accepts restrictions on personal liberty to prevent the spread of deadly disease, should they be necessary to prevent its reoccurrence? There has been talk of certification or so-called vaccine passports. Earlier this week, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, on which I sit, heard evidence on that from, among others, my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis). We heard questions in that evidence session about the effectiveness of such a scheme. Its introduction, for example, might be not just for a football stadium, but for the train there and back where a virus might be spread. If holding a vaccine passport is likely to affect access to key public services such as public transport, I think it will be necessary to show clearly the effectiveness of such a scheme and the data on which it is based.

That is, perhaps, a debate for another day, but a thorough debate on that subject will be necessary. In the meantime, I look forward to continuing to follow the road map to get us all out of the pandemic.

16:31:00

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con) [V]

This past year has been incredibly difficult for all of us, and I would like to start by paying tribute to the people of Runnymede and Weybridge for their boundless resolve and community spirit, and remembering those who have lost their lives as a result of the pandemic.

Many of my constituents are hurting. The pandemic and lockdown have hit us hard. Many have lost their jobs and many are desperate to see their loved ones. The road map and the fantastic vaccine roll-out bring those most valuable of commodities,

certainty and hope—something to look forward to that life will get better. I want to go faster, but I also agree that the need for irreversibility and certainty weighs heavy. I will therefore support the regulations we are voting on today, but I must reiterate that every day we have the restrictions in place they are causing great harm. The Government should move heaven and earth to lift them as soon as possible.

In the brief time I have in this debate, I want to talk about the broader provisions of the road map. As with all discussions on the coronavirus regulations, they are only half the story. We talk a lot about the new normal and the return to normal life after the pandemic. The road map charts out the plan for the lifting of legal restrictions, but not the return to normality. Covid has changed many aspects of life and I have been calling for a long-term plan for living with the virus. I am pleased that the road map starts to tackle that through the four reviews on: large events, covid certification, international travel and social distancing.

Those four reviews will do all the heavy lifting. They are critical to setting out what our post-pandemic covid world—our endemic covid world—will look like after June. When legal restrictions lift, the impact of the recommendations will still be felt. They will have a far longer lasting impact than what we vote on today. They will form the basis of what the new normal will be on a huge range of issues that impact on daily lives, from social distancing requirements in pubs and restaurants to the wearing of face masks, self-isolation and contact tracing.

I ask the Minister, in his closing remarks, to clarify that we will get to debate in the House the outputs of those critical reviews—the Government’s endemic covid road map, as it were—and that we will be able not just to vote on any resulting legislation, but to approve any formal guidance and provisions resulting from it.

16:34:00

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con) [V]

My hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) was clear about the desire of his constituents to move on from these restrictions. Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner is no different in that respect—people have borne with fortitude the restrictions on their lives.

However, I very much support of extending the measures before us this evening, and I will support the Government. It is clear that there have been a number of false dawns on the way away from the impact that covid has had on all our communities. There have been times when we thought we had it on the run but it became more of a problem, and more of our residents died or were seriously ill as a consequence, so we need to make sure that we have a package of measures in place that will enable the Government and the country to support all our citizens and communities. While I completely understand that we are chafing against a number of the restrictions in the legislation, there are far more important elements that are entirely about support for businesses and people who are affected.

As we look forward to that road map, with businesses of different kinds reopening and people being welcomed back to our high streets and shopping centres, and to activities such as sport and the arts, which have had to go into the deep freeze during this covid period, it is absolutely vital that we have these backstop powers

so that if there is a resurgence of covid, perhaps from a mutation, the Government are able to act swiftly and respond to dampen that down and keep our people safe. For all those reasons, I support what is before us and will support the Government this evening.

16:36:00

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) [V]

It is always a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), who talked about the importance of keeping some of the provisions within the Coronavirus Act, very much in a just-in-case manner. I will speak from my perspective as Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee about three components that have caused us concern in the past and one that still does.

We very much welcome the action taken by the Health and Social Care Secretary to remove the Act's provisions around the Mental Health Act 1983 and sectioning back in December. They had not been used and were therefore not needed. I also very much welcome his actions over the course of the last 24 hours in deciding to retire, as it were, the Care Act 2014 easements, which the Women and Equalities Committee had called for and, indeed, which I would be calling for this afternoon had he not already done it.

However, the same step has not been taken over the education easements in the Act. Too many disabled children have not received the support they need during the pandemic. These easements have not been used since July, yet the justification for keeping them, sent to me by the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), is that the Secretary of State is keeping them under review in case the evidence changes. The Minister acknowledges in her letter to me, dated today, that the powers are unused and have not been used since last July. Indeed, she goes on to state that, compared with May, June and July last year, these flexibilities are much less needed. If they are unused and the evidence shows that they are less needed, why are they being retained? I am not some great conspiracy theorist; I do not think that this is an attempt by the Secretary of State for Education to keep this power indefinitely, but it is not used and it is not needed, yet it remains on the statute book. Of course, there is no ability to amend just that one section this evening.

Respectfully, I argue that the justification we have been given makes no sense, and I urge the Secretary of State for Education to think again on retaining these powers. Parents are desperately worried that children with special educational needs are not getting access to the assistance they need. They are back in school now, which I absolutely welcome, but I urge the Education Secretary to reconsider and to remove these unneeded easements.

16:38:00

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con) [V]

It is a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes). I have been privileged to serve on two Select Committees during the pandemic, the Science and Technology Committee and the Procedure Committee, both ably chaired by hon. Friends who spoke earlier in the debate. I therefore have quite a lot to try to say in these three minutes.

I have supported the Government on their measures throughout the pandemic and I will do so again, with some reservations, tonight. I said in the debate in this Chamber in September:

“By the spring, we will need a new plan, informed by the scientific evidence at the time and by what we learn over the winter, because we simply cannot continue to live like this forever.”—[Official Report, 28 September 2020; Vol. 681, c. 109.]

We cannot live in fear. Luckily the vaccine works, but even if it had not, we would still need a way out of lockdown.

We now have a new plan and, to echo my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), I think it would be churlish of me to reject it because it might not be as fast as I would like or what I think would be manageable given the data. We have heard a lot about “data, not dates”, yet there are a lot of dates in the legislation and not a lot of data. My right hon. Friend the Health Secretary and the Prime Minister both describe the plans as “cautious but irreversible”, but I think there is a tension there with what we could achieve. The scientists told us in the Science and Technology Committee that they needed four weeks to assess the effects of each step, and the Government want a fifth week so that we can make preparations. I think the Government could consider scrapping that fifth week and taking the associated political risk, not the scientific risk, on to their own broad shoulders.

I also feel that there is an overall sense of mission creep. We have protected the NHS, which is how the lockdowns were sold to us, but the sooner we have our lives back, the better. I was glad to hear my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) that the way forward in step 4 is personal responsibility allied to the vaccine and to test and trace. I should pause to praise my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary. His belief in science and in the possibility of rapid vaccine development has been rewarded in spades, and his wisdom in ensuring that Oxford tied up with AstraZeneca is clear from the contrasting experiences we see across the channel and in other countries.

Turning to the procedural elements of the motions, I have been glad to serve under the excellent chairmanship of my fellow north Staffordshire MP, my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), but I was also glad to support the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) in that Committee. It is a matter of honour for many of us that we return, as we promised, to how things were before the pandemic. There may be many things we can learn from the procedural innovations that we have seen, and I think we should have the chance to do that. I welcome what the Prime Minister said in his response to the Chair of the Committee that we will have a debate on this, but I fear that there has not been enough time for us to debate these procedural innovations. It is a matter of honour that we return as promised, and it is also a matter of honour that this House aligns what we are doing with what we are asking the country to do.

16:42:00

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op)

This is a solemn moment. In the week when we mark the anniversary of our first

lockdown and of this emergency legislation, we must start by reflecting with sadness on the loss of the lives of 125,000 of our countrymen and women: mothers, fathers, sons, daughters and friends. That is an awful lot of broken hearts, and our thoughts and prayers are with all of them.

Today, we are acting to protect the country as much as possible as we go forward, and in that spirit, we have had a really high-quality and interesting debate. I reflect particularly on the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), who talked about the disproportionate impact on black, Asian and ethnic minority individuals in our country. We should reflect on what that says about Britain. I also reflect on the contribution from the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) about some of our most vulnerable people. We must hold them very much at the forefront of our minds as we act today.

I am in the slightly iniquitous position of agreeing with, but having to disagree with, a number of my own colleagues, but I do not think that it serves me, them or anybody else well to disagree with them and not say so. I agree with the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) on hospitality, by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) on low pay and support for those who need it, and by my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) regarding protest. I have a lot of sympathy with many of the provisions in the Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), and I agree with everything my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) said about her desire to amend what is in front of us today. I also share the view of my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) that it is wrong that this is a take-it-or-leave-it proposition. I agree with all those points, but I cannot agree that the answer is to vote against these measures today. I do not think that that is the right course of action, because we would lose all these provisions. I will reflect on them shortly.

I disagree, too, with what colleagues in the Liberal Democrats have said. The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), the hon. Members for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) and for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) have completed the set today. On some points they have agreed with the proposals, on some points they have abstained and on some points they have disagreed. I do not think that that sort of going with the wind is what we need in a pandemic. We have been consistent: we support the Government on the restrictions we have needed to protect public health.

Reflecting on contributions from Conservative Members, I agree with everything the excellent Chair of the Procedure Committee, the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), said regarding amendments. I slightly disagreed with the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine)—although I agree with the spirit of what he said—about being hoist by our own petard. The right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) talked about us being stuck with a take-it-or-leave-it proposition, but there is nothing inevitable about that. The Government could have brought forward amendable provisions today, and we would have been in a much better position if they had done so. I think I would have looked fondly on what the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) said, and our amendment is also sensible. We could really have improved this legislation, and I hope the Government will reflect on what it is they are recoiling from when it comes to Parliament improving their

laws.

There was a strong but, I would still argue, fringe line of argument from a group of colleagues that we need fewer not greater protections for the British people. It was well represented by the hon. Members for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) and for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) and the hon. Members for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) and for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely). I believe, as I have said before, that those colleagues have been wrong at every turn and are wrong again today. It is wrong to look at the pain that this virus has caused and to continue to advocate weakening our tools to fight it.

I do not believe either that it is a question of liberty—I do not think it can be. Every one of those colleagues voted last week for draconian fetters on the right to protest.

Sir Charles Walker

On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. You will be well aware that I was not able to vote in last week's Divisions, because I am chairing the relevant Bill in Committee, so that is not a legitimate point of debate from the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans)

The shadow Minister will have heard the comments, and I am sure he would want to respond himself.

Alex Norris

I apologise to the hon. Gentleman. I am wrong there, and I would like the record corrected.

I would say that those colleagues—those who were present in previous Parliaments—also voted for the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014 and for reforms to trade union rights. I also believe that most, if not all, of them intend to vote for what are pretty draconian reforms to our voting process, particularly regarding identification. So I am not here to take lectures on individual freedom.

I think this is about ideology and worldview. If someone spent the 40 years since Ronald Reagan became President telling people that the thing holding them back was Government and that the way forward was less Government, then this last year has been a problem. It has shown at home and abroad that Government do have a role in making sure that people have an income, do have a role in making sure that they have housing and do have a role in protecting their health, and that it is not always best to leave things to the market.

Sir Graham Brady

I am listening carefully to the argument the hon. Gentleman is developing. Is he saying that there is simply no limit to how long he would be willing to have these restrictions on people's freedoms in place, should there always be some threat of another variant of covid?

Alex Norris

I am grateful for that intervention. That is not my position and I am going to develop that argument shortly. I would hope to hear from the Minister that, particularly with these provisions lasting into October, he intends to bring them down much more quickly than that and as soon as we can. The point that the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands made about 21 June being present only in the procedural motions was a very good one.

Let me make a couple of points about the specifics and substance of the Act. It is right that the opportunity is being taken today to sunset provisions in it—certainly ones that have not been used—and we support the Government where they have chosen to do that. However, I do wish to question the Minister on the three provisions that are suspended. On sections 22 and 23, which expire tomorrow, I would like clarity that, as they have expired rather than been formally turned off, they will not be revivable and there is no intention to revive them. On section 58, in relation to transportation, storage and disposal of dead bodies, why was that only suspended? There does not seem to be a foreseeable use for that.

I also wish to query a number of powers that the Government have chosen to neither turn off nor suspend. Why is section 14, on continuing healthcare assessments, not being turned off, given that its counterpart, section 15, is? Section 37, on the temporary closure of educational institutions and childcare premises, has never been used, and I do not think its use is foreseeable. On section 50, on the power to suspend port operations, I do not think there is any anxiety about Border Force's resourcing levels to cover our ports. Why has that not been turned off yet? On section 52, which many colleagues have raised, on events, gatherings and premises, there are surely better tools in other bits of legislation and regulations that we could use.

I hope that we will learn from this crisis. In particular, the points made by colleagues about a public inquiry are important. It would be very difficult for the Government to get independent feedback about why we have one of the worst death tolls in the world and one of the worst recessions in the world, but we simply must learn the lessons for the future, no matter how hard it is for Ministers to hear them.

I want to reflect on a couple of things that are still missing in the approach and in the road map. It is a really significant gap. For all the good news in the Budget for self-employed people, so many—possibly millions—are still ineligible for that support. Those excluded continue to receive almost nothing beyond social security—and some of them are not eligible for that because they have been saving, for example, to pay off tax liabilities. That is wrong, it has been wrong throughout, and I cannot understand why Ministers have not moved more quickly on it.

Similarly, we are letting down our nation's carers. We clapped for them but now refuse to make a meaningful recognition of their contribution. The derisory 1% pay offer for NHS staff is a real-terms cut and completely unacceptable under these circumstances. Also we should not leave out of the conversation social care workers, working in the homes of some of our most vulnerable people, meeting the health needs of people who really need it, but putting their own at risk. What is their reward for that? A clap on a Tuesday and then a pay freeze in the Budget. That will mean that, for the 10th year in a row, their pay will be squeezed. That

should be an enormous source of shame for the Government. I hope the Minister could reflect, and perhaps give us some good news on that when he stands up to speak.

To conclude, we will support this. We do not do so without reservation or with much pleasure, but it is the situation we find ourselves in today. There is nothing inevitable about it. The virus has been a problem for every country, but we have struggled particularly. So we need these measures so we can cautiously move forwards and make this lockdown our last.

16:51:00

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar)

This House has come together once again to consider coronavirus regulations. The contrast with the previous occasions on which we did so, of course, is that today we are debating in part the road map to recovery—one that eases rather than strengthens the restrictions we face. It sets out our path to freedom. They are freedoms that none of us would have ever wished to have to curtail, save for the gravest of circumstances, but it is true that, as a country, we have faced some very grave times indeed. It has been a long, challenging year for all of us—individuals, families, businesses—and that was brought home so poignantly on Tuesday, as we remembered those we have lost through the pandemic. We have come a very long way, but equally, we know that those dark days are not that far behind us yet, so the fact that we may cautiously begin to look to brighter days ahead is a tribute to so many.

In that vein, again, I wish to put on record my thanks to our NHS and care staff and, indeed, key workers, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) did, for all they have done; and, of course, to thank the British people, whose sacrifices and solidarity have set us on this better course. As more and more of our population heed the call to be vaccinated, we are setting our country up for a safer future, too. So we have much to be optimistic about.

But colleagues will have been watching recent events on the continent with some concern. Not far from these shores, cases are rapidly on the rise. As the Prime Minister recently acknowledged, the wave sweeping through Europe has the potential to

“wash up on our shores as well”.

Equally concerning, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has alluded to on a number of occasions, are the new variants—many of them, it must be recognised, detected through world-leading British genomics capabilities— which continue to pose a threat to the progress we have made. As we debate easing restrictions here today, our friends in France, Germany, Italy, the Czech Republic and many others find themselves moving in the other direction—tightening lockdowns, extending curfews and shutting down again. That is a fate we are determined to avoid, and one I believe we will avoid if we proceed carefully and follow the cautious steps set out in our road map.

We all want to see the economic and social freedoms and activities that mean so much to us resume as swiftly as possible and, of course, to be able to see friends and family again. As the Secretary of State set out, at each step of that

reopening, we are allowing four weeks to monitor the impact of the previous step and one week to ensure that we give businesses and individuals enough notice to plan for the reopening and easing. That timeframe is playing a vital part in ensuring that we are truly on a one-way route to freedom. I make no secret that this is a balancing act, with each step cautiously weighed and considered.

Much of today's debate has understandably focused on another aspect of the response to the pandemic that we will be voting on today—the six-month review of the provisions in the Coronavirus Act 2020. We have had many passionate and thoughtful speeches. No one wishes the Act to be necessary and to be in place a day longer than is necessary—not me, not the Secretary of State, not the Prime Minister and not hon. Members in this House. Whether one disagrees or agrees with the case put by the Secretary of State—hon. Members will not be surprised to know that I agree wholeheartedly with the case he put in arguing that we should be backing the motion today—I would not for one moment impugn or question in any way the integrity, sincerity or motivation of hon. Members who, from perfectly reasonable perspectives, have set out their concerns about this. However, these measures regrettably do remain necessary. To reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady), I do not believe that there is any desire or intent within Government to in any way normalise such measures.

Let me turn to some of the key specific points raised by hon. and right hon. Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) put the case and highlighted extremely well that, while we have made huge strides forward through vaccinations, and we have seen the death rate and hospitalisation rate come down, we are not yet out of the woods entirely. That is why we must, I believe, continue to be cautious and why the road map is necessary.

I would like to say that it was a pleasure to hear from the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), but I am mindful not to mislead the House. However, I will address one substantive point he raised, when he appeared to be arguing for zero covid. I have to be clear with him, as the chief medical officer has been clear, that such an approach is neither practical nor realistic and we must, as a society, live with residual elements of covid for many years to come. That touches on risk. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) and many other colleagues talked about striking the right balance in terms of what levels of risk society is prepared to live with. The Secretary of State alluded to this in his opening remarks. It is hugely important that we weigh up the precautionary approach with the desire and need to open up our economy and society.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), the Chair of the Procedure Committee, rightly highlighted our common law approach in this country whereby things are permitted unless explicitly forbidden and said how exceptional it would be to have to change that presumption. Sadly, we have faced exceptional times and that is why these measures have been necessary, but they are not measures that any of us would choose to introduce were we not faced with such a grave situation.

Hon. Members talked about the importance of clear comms, building trust and the right messaging. That is absolutely right. It is hugely important that we set the right expectations and that we are clear with the public about how the vaccine is allowing us to move out of lockdown, but also about the challenges still posed. I

have to say I was a little surprised to be lectured by the leader of the Liberal Democrats, the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), on so-called fake news. The irony of Liberal Democrats lecturing the House on so-called fake news will not be lost on hon. Members.

Let me move on to some very serious points as I conclude. My hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) asked why schedule 22 was necessary. The reality is that, while the 1984 Act gives a considerable number of powers, some elements of critical infrastructure would not be able to be closed, even in the event of an outbreak with a dangerous new variant, under that Act. That is one power that was lacking there that the Secretary of State rightly—I share his view—believes may be necessary, although hopefully it will not be necessary, in that context.

I will make two points briefly in the minute I have remaining. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has been very clear that we have set out the intention to expire around 25% of the non-devolved powers under this Act. If it was possible to do so without incurring that risk and to be ready for all eventualities, I know that he would not wish to see this Act coming before us today for renewal, but it is. It is necessary and, sadly, is going to be necessary for a few more months.

The shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), talked about the right to protest—I will try to answer this very quickly—and asked what the guidance is likely to include. That essentially is about things such as the need for a formal organiser, for example, and a risk assessment to take place—that is what that is referring to. I commend these motions to the House.

17:00:00

The Deputy Speaker put the Question (Order, this day).

Question agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Steps) (England) Regulations 2021 (S.I., 2021, No. 364), dated 22 March 2021, a copy of which was laid before this House on 22 March, be approved.

The Deputy Speaker then put the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Order, this day).

CORONAVIRUS ACT 2020 (REVIEW OF TEMPORARY PROVISIONS) (NO.2)

Motion made, and Question put,

That the temporary provisions of the Coronavirus Act 2020 should not yet expire.—(Matt Hancock.)

Division 246

25/03/2021 17:01:00

The House divided:

Ayes: 484

Noes: 76

Question accordingly agreed to.

The list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy, is published at the end of today's debates.

Coronavirus Act 2020 (One-year status report)

Resolved,

That this House has considered the one-year report on the status on the non-devolved provisions of the Coronavirus Act 2020.—(Matt Hancock.)

Proceedings during the Pandemic (No. 6)

Resolved,

That the Order of 2 June 2020 (Proceedings during the pandemic (No. 2)), as amended on 1 July and 22 October 2020, the Order of 4 June 2020 (Virtual participation in proceedings during the pandemic), as amended on 1 July, 2 September, 22 October and 30 December 2020, the Order of 3 November 2020 (Proxy voting during the pandemic (No. 2)) and the Order of 25 February (Sittings in Westminster Hall during the pandemic) shall have effect until 21 June.—(Matt Hancock.)

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans)

I wish all Members a very good and peaceful Easter, as well as all the staff who have worked here and looked after us during this particularly stressful period.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab)

On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. May I seek your guidance on a matter of correcting the record? Earlier today, during the urgent question on steel and the situation at Liberty asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), the Business Secretary said that the closure of SSI happened before 2010, but that is not correct.

If the Secretary of State does not know, the plant was purchased by SSI in February 2011 but closed in October 2015, after David Cameron refused to intervene. How might we get the Business Secretary to correct the record, to reassure Liberty Steel workers—not least those in Hartlepool pipe mills, who remember the fate of the Teesside steelworkers at SSI—that he will not abandon steel? It is very telling that the Government do not know or understand their own record of inaction on steel.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans)

I thank the hon. Lady for advance notice of her point of order. As she knows, the Chair is not responsible for the content of any contribution from a Minister. Having said that, Mr Speaker has made it absolutely clear that where a Minister knows that they have inadvertently misled the House or there is an inaccuracy, they should correct the record as quickly as possible.